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Critical Discussion

THE DECLINE OF LITERARY CRITICISM

by RICHARD A. POSNER

RÓNÁN McDONALD, A LECTURER in literature at the University of Reading, has written a short, engaging book the theme of which is evident from the title: *The Death of the Critic*. Although there is plenty of both academic and journalistic writing about literature, less and less is well described by the term “literary criticism.” The literary critics of the first two-thirds or so of the twentieth century, now dead, including poets and other creative writers, such as T. S. Eliot, journalists such as Edmund Wilson, and academic literary critics, as distinct from literary scholars, such as F. R. Leavis in England and Cleanth Brooks in the United States, have so few successors that the very genre, if not yet dead, is moribund.¹ McDonald deplores the decline of literary criticism and seeks to explain its causes.

In place of literary criticism, McDonald (and many others, such as John Ellis) argue, we have postmodern literary theory, an animal of quite a different color from literary criticism.² “Texts . . . are interpreted and analysed with a view to unlocking the social norms and attitudes encoded therein, not assessed or evaluated as integral, self-contained creations” (McDonald, p. 21). “The ‘best’ [is regarded] as a politically dubious category, with selections made in its name often nurturing hidden and hierarchical agendas” (p. ix). “In a comparatively short time,

The Death of the Critic, by Rónán McDonald, 160 pp. New York: Continuum, 2007, \$23.95.

academic literary criticism has been transformed. Many [literary critics] now regard social activism as the major purpose of literary criticism.” And “people who write about literature now write in a prose thick with impenetrable jargon,” which erects a barrier between literary theory and literature.³ The well documented decline in the reading of literature has many causes but one may be the obscurantist and politicized style of teaching literature that is in vogue in many colleges.⁴

But something deeper is involved. After all, most literary teachers are not postmodernists. What has happened is the professionalization, in not altogether a good sense, of literary studies. Let me illustrate. More than half a century ago, Cleanth Brooks published what became a famous book of literary criticism, consisting of close readings of famous poems.⁵ The New Critics were much taken with the metaphysical poets, the most prominent of whom was John Donne, and the high point of Brooks’s book was his brilliant close reading of “Canonization,” one of Donne’s most famous love poems. Just this year (2008) a professor of literature named Ramie Targoff published *John Donne, Soul and Body*, which has an extensive treatment of Donne’s love poetry, though it does not mention “Canonization.” As far as I can judge, Targoff’s book is a fine scholarly achievement—well written (and not defaced by jargon), thoroughly researched, thoughtful, imaginative. She argues that contrary to some scholars who have regarded Donne as a Neoplatonist who therefore believed that the highest love is purely spiritual (as it was for Plato), he was, throughout his career—even when he became a fiercely devout Anglican cleric writing fervid religious verse—a believer that body and soul were one in all activities, including sexual love; hence the religious imagery in “Canonization,” emphasized by Cleanth Brooks, who would I think have found Targoff’s analysis congenial. Her book is I would guess a model of modern literary scholarship.

But here is the difference between Brooks’s book, and specifically his discussion of Donne’s poem, and Targoff’s. Brooks, who though a distinguished Yale English professor did not have a Ph.D., wrote for a mixed audience—academics, students, the general reader—and he made the nonacademic members of that audience want to read Donne, or read more Donne, or re-read Donne with greater understanding and enjoyment. Targoff writes for other scholars of early modern English literature. Someone else who chances on the book (like me) may read it and think well of it, but unless one has esoteric religious or philosophical interests the experience of reading her book will not quicken one’s

interest in reading Donne's poetry—which is a great shame, given the state of the literary culture in America.

The professionalization of literary studies has many causes, but one of particular significance is a half century or more falling off in literary creativity. There are peaks in artistic creativity and troughs. For literature, the first quarter of the twentieth century was an incredible peak, and it engendered exciting literary criticism. In part this was because much of this modernist literature was difficult, and required expert interpretation. But that factor is overemphasized. Most modernist literature (Eliot, Yeats, late Henry James, Proust, Joyce until *Finnegans Wake*) is difficult only in comparison with Tennyson. Much literature that endures, whatever the era in which it was composed, is downright baffling—think of Shakespeare and his contemporaries (what *did* Marvell mean by “Annihilating all that's made / To a green Thought in a green Shade?”), or for that matter of Keats—what *does* “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” mean?

What happens in a period of heightened literary creativity is that not only are there exciting new works to subject to literary criticism but that, as T. S. Eliot famously said, the old works are seen in a new light—think of how Eliot's own poetic practices shaped his criticism of Dante, Donne, the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, and Milton. We are now rather in a trough of literary creativity, probably because of the rise of competing media for expression, and so there is less exciting work for literary critics. Not that there aren't fine writers; but they are not literary revolutionaries—the analogy is to Thomas Kuhn's notion of “normal science,” the dullish stretches between “paradigm shifts.”

But there is still a need for college and university teachers of English, and a felt need to evaluate them on the basis of their publications, and so the focus of their writing shifts from criticism to the more conventional form of academic scholarship that involves writing for each other. The resulting decline in literary criticism retards the prospects for a renewal of literary creativity by reducing the audience for serious literature, so there is unfortunately something of a vicious cycle, though it seems doubtful that literary criticism has ever been much of a spur to literary creativity.

Now all that I have said so far is merely prologue; it is the (highly tentative) answer I would give to McDonald's question about the causes of the decline of literary criticism. He not only gives a different answer, but has a different conception of literary criticism, and let me begin

my analysis of his book there. For him (not for me, as I'll explain in due course) the essence of literary criticism is that it is evaluative; his book's "governing theme is the fate of evaluation and the basis on which it is built" (p. ix). Because criticism is evaluative, it is disliked, as McDonald illustrates with some wonderful quotations. From Brendan Behan: "Critics are like eunuchs in a harem; they know how it is done, they've seen it done every day, but they're unable to do it themselves" (p. 9). From George Bernard Shaw: "A drama critic is a man who leaves no turn unstoned" (p. 10). From Samuel Becket: literary criticism is "hysterectomies with a trowel" (p. 10). Northrop Frye derided evaluative criticism as belonging to the history of taste rather than to literary criticism (pp. 100–101).

Of course, literary criticism is not all negative; "critic" is etymologically related to "criteria"; the literary critic is a judge, not a denouncer, and McDonald gives examples of literary criticism that have promoted a writer's work, such as Edmund Wilson's book *Axel's Castle*. Nevertheless, literary critics' "trade is evaluative hierarchies"—but, as we have just seen, "they are low on the totem pole of the writing profession" (p. 41), so when they do "criticize," their work is derided by the writers.

The criticisms of criticism make it fragile, vulnerable, and so does the difficulty that critics have in keeping their criticism free from contamination by their religious, political, and other extraliterary beliefs. The New Critics, nominally formalist, emphasized not only their opposition to science, technology, and industry,⁶ but also their belief that the outlook they found in the poetry and other literature they admired was isomorphic with Christianity.⁷ McDonald argues that postmodern literary theory descends from F. R. Leavis and other "extrinsic" critics (among whom the New Critics must, for the reason I just stated, be counted): "By focusing on the moral, life-affirming qualities of art, [Leavis] had created a culture whereby artistic values were instrumental, directed at purposes outside the artwork's own merits" (p. 121). To the extent that literary critics' evaluations of literary works are moral or ideological, they are unlikely to be objective. And, like the New Critics, Leavis and his followers saw the "moral, life-affirming qualities of art" as a bulwark against technological modernity, yet could not resist the pressure that academia exerts on academics to strive for intellectual rigor: "the implicit or explicit calls on scientific authority to justify literary critical practices, while at the same time holding culture as the redemptive alternative to science, would generate a tension that could easily teeter into outright contradiction. All that needed to happen was for the value-free methods

of literary criticism to double back and collide with its quasi-religious purposes" (p. 93).

Notice the dependence of McDonald's analysis on his conception of literary criticism as evaluative. It is because it is evaluative (and because most of the evaluators are not themselves creative writers) that it is hated by creative writers and undermined by the critics' inability to exclude their political or religious beliefs from their criticism at the same time that they are pretending to be rigorous and objective.

Suppose evaluation is not the essence of literary criticism. Suppose, further, that the quest for objective evaluation of literary works is a snipe hunt, so that it is fortunate that evaluation is not the essence of literary criticism. This reorientation would make the decline of criticism no less real, but would upend McDonald's explanation of it.

Let me return to Cleanth Brooks's analysis of Donne's "Canonization." It is obvious that he admires the poem. But he does not tell the reader, this is a good poem—read it; don't read Joyce Kilmer or Vachel Lindsay. He explains the poem, with particular emphasis on why it is shot through with paradox. He argues throughout *The Well Wrought Urn* that paradox is the language of poetry, and he supports the argument with reference not only to the "Canonization" but also to poems by Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, and others who were not part of the metaphysical school, the school of Donne. He leaves it to the reader to decide whether to read any of these poems. If one thinks of how the great twentieth-century critics influenced taste—such as T. S. Eliot with respect to the metaphysical poets, Edmund Wilson with respect to the modernist poets, F. R. Leavis with respect to D. H. Lawrence—one quickly realizes that it was not by *ex cathedra* utterance, such as "I am T. S. Eliot, the great poet and intellectual, and I tell you that Donne is superior to Milton," but by saying, in effect, "You should try reading Donne, because he does things that when you understand him may cause you as it has caused me to prefer him to Milton, and he has a more mature, a more comprehensive conception of the human condition than Shelley (though less so than Dante did), as well as more exact metaphors."

The approach of the influential academic critics, such as Brooks and Empson, C. S. Lewis and Lionel Trilling, A. C. Bradley and Richard Blackmun, was essentially the same. They were writing not only or even primarily for other academics, but rather for serious students and the cream of the general reading public, and they were trying to make literature more accessible and more interesting to readers.

Thus, what has been lost is literary criticism that helps people

understand and enjoy serious literature. The disappearance of arbiters of taste, of literary mandarins whose authority the laity is expected to acknowledge, is no loss. As Benedetto Croce said, “criticism conceived as magistrate kills the dead or breathes on the face of what is very much alive anyway . . . I would like to ask whether critics have been responsible for establishing the greatness of Dante, Shakespeare, or Michelangelo, or, on the contrary, the great number of their readers and spectators.”⁸

The problem with “criticism conceived as magistrate”—the problem that McDonald not only does not solve, but does not acknowledge—is that there are no objective criteria of aesthetic distinction. The reason is that there is nothing that all great works of literature have in common but lesser works of literature do not. When critics propose criteria that they think will distinguish the great from the non-great, they end up narrowing the canon of great literature in arbitrary ways, as T. S. Eliot attempted to do with Milton and Shelley. There is no need to develop a litmus test for great literature. Critics can point to the features of literary works that they like or dislike without assuming the authority to tell people what they should read. And Croce was right: you don’t need evaluative critics in order to have a “canon” of great literature. The canon evolves in Darwinian fashion; writers compete, and the works that are best adapted to the cultural environment flourish.

I fear that McDonald has succumbed to the cliché that the enemy of my enemy is my friend: the cultural studies crowd is against evaluative criticism, so McDonald is for it, provided it is objective—but he does not show how literary criticism can be objective. But the problem is not that modern-day literary criticism is not evaluative; it is that literary criticism aimed at increasing the readership of great literature has been displaced by literary theory, on the one hand, and by literary scholarship for literary scholars only (like Targoff’s book on Donne), on the other hand.

A recent issue of the *New Yorker* contains a terrific article on Milton by a journalist (who is also the author of a novel appropriately titled *Eve’s Apple*). The *New Yorker* has a large circulation and the article will persuade some of the magazine’s subscribers to read or re-read Milton’s poetry, but not because Jonathan Rosen is an “authority.” The great writers are little read in the United States, but this is not because they are not agreed to be great writers. College teachers influenced by modern-day literary theory to trash great literature and feed their captive audience a diet of obscurantist theoretical writings and deservedly obscure literary

works are doubtless a factor in the decline of the literary culture. But the dearth of evaluative criticism is not. If there were less pretentious literary theory and no evaluative criticism, but more readable literary criticism in the style of Cleanth Brooks or F. R. Leavis, the literary culture would be in a lot better shape than it is.

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1. Literary critics in McDonald's sense are public intellectuals. In my book *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), of the 100 public intellectuals who received the most mentions in the media between 1995–2002, only five could be described as literary critics, and only one of them, Joyce Carol Oates, is still alive. See *Public Intellectuals*, pp. 432–34 (tab. 5.3e), p. 439 (tab. 5.5e).
2. John M. Ellis, *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of Humanities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 8.
3. See, besides McDonald's book, and Ellis's, Victor Davis Hanson, John Heahht, and Bruce S. Thornton, *Bonfire of the Humanities: Rescuing the Classics in an Impoverished Age* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2001); Denis Donoghue, *On Eloquence* 13–14, 39–40 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Mark Bauerlein, "Bad Writing's Back," *Philosophy and Literature* 28 (2004): 180; Bauerlein, *Literary Criticism: An Autopsy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Brian Boyd, "Theory Is Dead—Like a Zombie," 30 *Philosophy and Literature* 30 (2006): 289, and references cited there.
4. See National Endowment of the Arts, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (Research Rep. No. 47, Nov. 2007); Albert N. Greco, Clara E. Rodrigues, and Robert M. Wharton, *The Culture and Commerce of Publishing in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 207–12.
5. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, 1947).
6. See, for example, Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (New York: Platt and Munk, 1939), pp 205–6, 217–18.
7. See, for example, William K. Wimsatt, Jr., "Poetry and Christian Thinking," in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), p. 267. "Verbal *icon*" is a suggestive term in this connection, and likewise the frequent use of the word "heresy" by the New Critics (for example, the "heresy of paraphrase"), and the analogy they like to draw between the Incarnation and a poem viewed as a "concrete universal."

8. Benedetto Croce, *Guide to Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965 [1913]), p. 68.
9. Jonathan Rosen, "Return to Paradise: The Enduring Relevance of John Milton," *New Yorker*, June 2, 2008, p. 72.

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