

TRE Ebook Volume

Let's Review:

Book Reviewing as Literary Criticism

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Book Reviewing in America

In her book *Faint Praise: The Plight of Book Reviewing in America* (University of Missouri Press), former *Boston Review* editor Gail Pool writes:

Readers dismayed by the lack of criticism in reviews won't find more of it in other coverage, most of which is promotion, sometimes in disguise. Newspaper book features--profiles and interviews--are promotional. Readings are promotional. "Reviews" written by booksellers, even independent booksellers, are promotional. Book clubs are promotional. Even readers' guides are promotional: produced by the publishers to enhance the books' value for—and sales to—reading groups, they may be designed to encourage more thoughtful reading, but they don't encourage a critical approach. None of the guides seem to ask readers to question the quality of a book's prose, its cliched characterization, or the problems in its story line. They start from the premise that the books are good, and it's their purpose to help readers "understand" why they're good, not discover they aren't.

Nor will readers frustrated by the quality of criticism in traditional reviewing find it improved by its nontraditional counterparts. On the contrary, in self-published reviews on the Web--the main nontraditional alternative--critical failings are and are bound to be exacerbated. It may be that editors too often fail to do their job in ensuring that reviews are unbiased, informed, well written, or critically astute, but I don't see how it can possibly be an improvement to eliminate the role of editor, the readers' only chance for quality control. Unscreened, anonymous, and unedited, self-published reviews can be—and often are—as biased, uninformed, ungrammatical, and critically illiterate as they like.

(122)

Pool, as she does throughout her book, shares the belief common among "professional" book reviewers that "criticism" and "book review" are synonymous terms—or at least that at their best newspaper and magazine reviews do embody what "criticism" is all about. Pool offers plenty of legitimate objections to the standards of book reviewing as currently practiced, but she never relinquishes the notion that reviewing, when done right, is an act of literary criticism, sine qua non.

For Pool, the defining feature of criticism is the more specific act of passing judgment. "Critical" in Pool's lexicon comes close to its overly literal and reductive meaning as "finding fault" (or looking for faults but happily not finding many). A novel has "problems in its story line" or fails to meet some predetermined measure of "quality" with which the critic is inspecting the text and pronouncing it fit or flawed. Discovering that a book might not be good becomes an urgent and noble endeavor that only the "critic," properly detached and unbiased, can venture to undertake.

Critical judgment can never be avoided entirely; it always lies behind discussions of aesthetic merit. But in my opinion, judgment is only the precursor to criticism, its necessary spark but not at all its fulfillment, which is only to be found in the further elucidation of the way the work constitutes itself as a work of fiction or poetry, of the specific nature of the experience of reading the work attentively. The work may present itself in a way that is completely familiar or utterly alien, or somewhere in between. The critic at the least must give a plausible enough account of the text's perceptible qualities to make the critical judgment credible, but just as often judgment might be simply assumed, taken for granted, even neglected altogether. Criticism that is able to "encourage more thoughtful reading" is valuable criticism indeed, and if in many cases the critic discusses works he/she implicitly values highly in order to "help readers 'understand' why they're good," this is probably in the long run a much more worthwhile expenditure of critical energy than the effort to demonstrate that some works aren't. (This use of critical intelligence to illuminate the aesthetic accomplishments of literary works amounts to the "promotion" of literature in the very best sense the term can bear.)

Pool is especially determined to preserve the prerogatives of editors in providing criticism through book reviewing. But true criticism is an unavoidably personal, very individualized activity. It's my encounter with the text, your encounter with the text, not this encounter as mediated by a third party presuming to act as gatekeeper. When Pool invokes "quality control" as the editor's job description, she's identifying this as a function within the hierarchy of a newspaper or magazine. Bias-, fact-, and grammar-checking are imperatives of journalism, not of literary criticism, which can be (in some cases should be) thoroughly biased, indifferent to "facts" except the facts of the text at hand, and resistant to hidebound rules of grammar when they interfere with the expression of difficult ideas or impede critical insight.

Even if we accept that newspaper or magazine book sections often benefit from inspired editing, Pool's own book often reveals that this sort of inspiration is sorely lacking in most book review pages. The "plight" of book reviewing is mostly a plight of editing, which fails to provide much in the way of "quality control" in the first place and has made book reviewing in America an activity without great relevance and characterized by a stale conformity of approach. At the top of Pool's list of needed reforms is "a better means of choosing books for review" (125). "Our current system," she writes, "inevitably leads to overlooking good books, overpraising bad ones, and undermining the book page." Well, who exactly is to blame for this "current system" in which the wrong books are reviewed, bad books are praised, and the book page trivialized if not the editors of the book pages? Don't they determine what gets reviewed and who does the reviewing? Aren't they responsible for publishing bland and vacuous reviews? Why in the world would we want to revive book reviewing by reinvesting in the very process that has caused the problem to begin with?

Faint Praise at the same time both pinpoints the reasons why book reviewing in the usual print publications has gone seriously wrong and argues that book reviewing can be saved only if the current "system" and the current mode of publication remain the same, with a little tweaking. It demonstrates why book reviewing as a form of literary journalism is probably doomed: Its author can see the flaws in the "system" in which she works, but can't imagine a solution outside of that system, even when such a solution is probably the only kind available.

That current book reviewing includes too little description of what the works reviewed actually do and too much glib evaluation can be seen in Emily Barton's review of Gary Lutz's *I Looked Alive* (Black Square Editions), which initially appeared in *Bookforum*. Even a dozen years after first reading this review, I still consider it one of the most egregious examples of what is wrong with American book reviewing I have encountered.

While Barton claims the stories in the book make for "rather anhedonic reading," I found them on the contrary to be rather moving on the whole, in addition to being structurally and stylistically challenging in the way we've come to expect of Gary Lutz's work. It's the kind of book that requires patience in the beginning, but eventually becomes more compelling as you read it. But "experimental" fiction is often like that.

Even if I didn't like these stories so much, however, I would still have great problems with Emily Barton's review. It's reasonably short, so I will point out the lowlights in order, as they manifest themselves to the reader's notice. Although the review masquerades as a "description" of *I Looked Alive*, what passes for description is transparently a way of conveying to the reader that Lutz simply doesn't write fiction the way it ought to be written, according to the reviewer's assumptions, at least.

Barton immediately informs us that Lutz's fiction "is difficult to read (to some the mark of experimentalism, to others shoddy craftsmanship). . ." The opposition between "experimentalism" and "craftsmanship" is patently obvious, of course, and we know before reading the rest of the review that we ought to avoid Lutz because he isn't a "craftsman." A craftsman doesn't write something that's "difficult to read." Never mind that this amounts to a wholesale rejection of the idea of experimental fiction in the first place, but it's a hopelessly reductive concept of what defines "craftsmanship" as well. If anything, experimental writers tend to be even more craftsmanlike in their approach, since what constitutes the "craft" of writing fiction is uppermost in their minds to begin with. Too many "well-made" stories or novels are not products of craft at all, but simple repetitions of formula.

Then there's "the fault of the narrative voice itself, which may make nominal switches from first to third person but sounds relentlessly the same from piece to piece." One of the blurbs printed on the book's back cover (from Sven Birkerts) accurately suggests that "the overall effect of a Lutz piece is not unlike what we experience reading a John Ashberry poem." Indeed, the structure and execution of Lutz's stories have at least as much in common with poetry as with fiction. Do we criticize poets because the "voice" in their poems "sounds relentlessly the same from piece to piece"?

This problem, from Barton's perspective, is presumably related to the next: "'Lutz never provides the one, salient fact that would imbue a character with vigorous life, or even make him memorable.'" This is a very familiar lament of reviewers whose most basic assumption is that fiction will present us with "memorable" characters. In addition to being "craftsmen," fiction writers are also expected to be portrait painters in prose. Apparently this is the only thing that makes some readers interested in fiction in the first place, but of course the very notion of "experimental" fiction suggests that these ingrained expectations of what fiction is supposed to

do are going to be challenged. If the writer isn't attempting to create memorable characters, it hardly seems a valid criticism to say that after all he doesn't do this. (Nevertheless, in my reading of these stories, several of the characters do stand out, and as a collective whole the characters in *I Looked Alive* are memorable indeed.)

If Lutz can't deliver up memorable characters, how about his ability to tell a story? "[It's] hard to know, moment by moment, what a Lutz story is even about," Barton observes. Putting aside the fact that this largely isn't true, that it's perfectly easy to see what a given story is "about" as long as you at least temporarily abandon the assumption that a story must proceed "moment by moment," this criticism really takes us to Barton's core complaint about this book, which is further captured in this declaration: "Experimental fiction typically forgoes the comforts of storytelling in order to reveal the world in a new light. Sadly, Lutz reveals little." Thus Emily Barton would be willing to overlook the lack of storytelling, if the book would only conform in this other way to the conventions of realistic fiction, revealing the world through fiction's "light." But in fact experimental fiction doesn't first "reveal the world" in a new way. It attempts to reveal the possibilities of fiction in a new way. If it also gets us to look at the world differently, fine, but Barton puts her critical cart before the literary horse.

Perhaps the most damaging of Barton's criticisms, if it was true, is that Lutz "can't even write prose of middling intelligibility," fails to "maintain a crystalline clarity." Certainly Lutz could write prose of "middling intelligibility" if he wanted to, but he doesn't. He's deliberately confronting the standard of "crystalline clarity," asking why literary experiment can't include experiment with conventional uses of language. In the book's very first paragraph we are told by the narrator that "I had not come through in either of the kids. They took their mother's bunching of features, and were breeze-shaken things, and did not cut too far into life." This is not immediately "informative" in a "crystalline" way, but if you pause (and pause you must, throughout most of this book) and consider it, it makes perfect sense as a description of the way this man might see his children. It's just a "new" way of expressing features we are accustomed to seeing signaled in more familiar phrases.

One could decide that Lutz has failed in his experiments with language or character, that they don't accomplish what he seems to have set out to do, but it hardly seems useful to criticize him for even trying them out in the first place, which is what Emily Barton's review finally

amounts to. It vividly illustrates the way in which “mainstream” book reviewing exists to reinforce “mainstream” literary values, in the process making a mockery of the idea that book reviewing might aspire to be responsible literary criticism genuinely open to the varied possibilities of literary art, as well as discouraging writers themselves from discovering what some of those possibilities might be.

Generally it is writers like Gary Lutz, restless writers impatient with conventional, mainstream literary values, who are accorded the otherwise infrequent negative review in the larger “community” of American book reviewers and editors. Most reviews of new fiction in too many publications are deferential and hesitant to criticize, except in the most inoffensive and formulaic way ("If I have one reservation, it is that. . ."). Book review pages often seem more like an adjunct of book publicity than a forum for honest literary criticism.

Most casual readers of book reviews would undoubtedly conclude that most reviews are written by other writers, who presumably have at least some motivation to call attention to their own work, to their own standing in the “community,” through reviewing. However, this mostly manifests in reviews full of praise for the fellow writer under review, as if the reviewer wants to signal he/she is a member in good standing of the writer's fraternity and understands his/her new novel will soon be making the rounds of the book review sections and in need of the same sort of gentle treatment. And even when the review is positive, as it usually is, vague but colorful descriptions often substitute for analysis "(X's style is like a red-hot poker jabbed at the reader's solar plexus") when plot summary won't quite suffice. Writers' jacket blurbs and their formal book reviews become increasingly hard to distinguish.

The blame for this state of affairs mostly goes to book review editors rather than these writers, however. The latter are being asked to perform a task they are neither prepared for nor temperamentally suited to. They have worked at becoming novelists or poets, not critics, and they understandably want to foster a literary culture in which novelists and poets are valued. The default assumption among editors seems to be that fiction writers and poets are the best judges of fiction and poetry, but this isn't usually the case. Some novelists and poets are indeed also good critics, but in most cases they have become so by fighting against the widespread belief that "creative writing" and criticism are antithetical practices. They are willing to make justified

judgments without worrying about how such judgments might be received by the author or how they might affect book sales.

In my opinion, such judgments are still most reliably made by disinterested literary critics, who have, or should have, even less reason to concern themselves with the transitory effects of honest commentary, as long as that commentary can be supported through careful reading. Reviewers do perform a service to the potential reader of a book, but "the reader" ought to include not just contemporaneous but future readers as well, to the extent reviews help determine what works continue to be considered worthwhile, beyond the current season in which books are regarded as commodities in the marketplace. In other words, the reviewer's first obligation, at least where seriously intended literary works are concerned, is to literature. In the long run, reviews are otherwise meaningless.

Going Negative

It might indeed be the case that many "negative" reviews of fiction are glib and opportunistic exercises in what has come to be called snark. Such reviews make little real effort to adequately describe the ambitions and strategies of the book under review, or to assess the book's success or relative failure to fulfill these ambitions with any degree of specificity. If this sort of review were to disappear, neither literature nor literary criticism would register the loss.

But to dismiss all critical evaluation that reaches unfavorable conclusions as illegitimate, somehow an affront to the "community" of writers and readers who value books at a time when reading seems endangered, is not just irrational but in fact a greater danger to sustaining a serious literary culture than indiscriminate snark would ever be. That some reviews elevate shallow and superficial pronouncements over considered judgment does not mean negative reviews that are carefully considered should be equally rejected. Moreover, writers themselves should welcome the latter sort of review, since it signifies the work has been taken seriously and given close attention. This seems to me an infinitely preferable response than empty praise, which, in the absence of the more rigorous standards implied by the possibility of a negative judgment, is all that reflexive approval is destined to become.

I wouldn't necessarily use the word "smarm" to identify this kind of praise, although anyone who writes book reviews simply to uncritically celebrate otherwise mediocre writers

because all writers need "support" is hard to take seriously. Especially when the reviewer is him/herself also primarily a fiction writer, readers are well-justified to think that such reviews are a form of self-protection at the least, but even when they are sincerely intended, more often than not the lack of real critical engagement with the book under review undermines credibility. Synopsis substitutes for analysis, and judgment is replaced with rhetorical flash and vacuous accolades. Indeed, this sort of rah-rah reviewing is so common, so much dominates the discourse of book reviewing at the moment, that it's always surprising to me when someone suggests there are too many negative reviews around.

The advice often given to reviewers and critics who might have something actually critical to say about a book or a writer is to just say nothing instead, to let one's silence stand as sufficient commentary. In long-form criticism, this makes some sense; extended consideration of the flaws in a particular work or a writer's body of work is not usually as worthwhile a use of critical space as the explication of the most accomplished works and admired writers. (Although dissenting evaluations of established writers that question their critical standing certainly have their place.) However, contemporaneous book reviews serve a different purpose. The best reviews do not facilitate "consumer choice" or "cultural discussion" (although some reviews might inadvertently do these things) but take on the responsibility of providing an initial critical reaction to books that presumably seek an audience not just among those who happen to read this week's newspaper, and not just among readers this month or this year, but also future readers for whom the book's literary merit has become the most important consideration, not its purely occasional interest as a "new book" or as an artifact arising from its circumstances of its publication (the review's circumstances of publication as well). In some cases, those reviews provide the only available critical guidance to such readers, but even if additional, more extended criticism has subsequently appeared, often the presuppositions at work were introduced by the initial responses to the book or writer found in reviews.

This was certainly my experience as a fledgling scholar of contemporary literature, when I was trying to round up the critical responses to writers in whose work I had an interest. Of course, most contemporary fiction has yet to accumulate the kind of formal criticism associated with more canonical literature, but I would always look first at the reviews, and usually found they had in one way or another (in rendering both positive and negative judgments) established

the context in which the writer's work continued to be discussed, the most thoughtful and conscientious reviews often enough still providing valuable insights into that work. Had I been surveying reviews motivated by the perceived need to reinforce a literary "community" against attack rather than to reinforce literature itself through honest and detailed literary criticism, even in the modest form of the book review, I would most likely have found little of value and concluded that such a "literary" culture doesn't really take literature very seriously.

Of course no writer welcomes an unfavorable evaluation of his/her work. It's another thing altogether, however, to extend one's dissatisfaction with this sort of critical scrutiny to a general proscription of negative criticism in the name of fellow-feeling for one's putative colleagues. Not only does this reduce the creation of literary art to an exercise in group solidarity, but it's practically an invitation to writers encouraging them to do shoddy work. Since whatever I might write is going to be praised simply because I wrote it (lest I get discouraged), there's no particular reason for me to artistically challenge either myself or my potential readers.

The impatience with which many writers (and some critics) regard "negative" reviews is in part a natural enough response, reflecting the tense relationship between artists and their critics that has probably always existed. On the other hand, it seems to me that such tension has become particularly acute in our time because of two simultaneous and seemingly contradictory phenomena: There are more published and aspiring-to-be published writers than ever before, and the audience for serious fiction (and poetry) continues to diminish. In these circumstances, negative reviews threaten to undermine the "community" that has come to substitute for the cultural recognition poets and novelists have lost and might deprive writers of whatever small chance they have of gaining readers among what remains of a general reading audience.

Defenders of negative reviews often justify them as providing a service to readers, who will be cautioned against spending their time with an inferior book. Even those who don't think reviews are primarily a form of consumer guidance (and thus a function of capitalism more than literature) nevertheless generally contend that the evaluative role of criticism should take precedence, helping readers come to a conclusion about a given work's merit. If this is done by offering evidence and cogent analysis, it is a perfectly valid exercise, although it would seem that the occasions for performing it should be limited: What's the point of subjecting a book by an early-career writer to harsh critical treatment when it's not likely to attract much of an audience

anyway and can safely be left to its fated lack of attention as an ultimate verdict? Why take up too much review space and critical effort with bad books when what's really needed is for the good but neglected books to be discovered?

After all, in the long run lengthier critical commentary isn't going to be afforded to truly inferior work. Literary criticism of a more extended sort almost always centers on books that have continued to resonate, whose success is no longer at issue. Few serious critics—and not just academic critics—are going to devote these opportunities for more thorough critical reading to largely superfluous evaluation. Despite the widespread impression of critics as prescriptive taskmasters, literary hanging judges, evaluation is not the most essential task taken up by the literary critic. At their best, critics are not judges, but more like witnesses offering an account of the reading experience that has a tentative authority that comes from close and conscientious reading allied with a grasp of context—literary, cultural, historical. A critic of this kind describes, makes connections, explicates, albeit as the means to the discovery of value, a discovery the critic hopes the reader will share.

If criticism is not the act of rendering a critical verdict on a literary work, neither is it any kind of evaluation of the author of the work, a divining of the author's character or moral standing from his/her "presence" in the text. Thus a negative review is not an attempt to find fault with the writer but to point out flaws in the work through identifiable standards. (If the standards can't be identified then the review itself is fatally flawed and can't be taken seriously, anyway.) Likewise, a positive review is not an affirmation of the writer, but the qualities of the book at hand that make it artistically successful. Quite likely most writers would not take such offense at negative reviews if they didn't implicitly believe that a positive review is not just an expression of approval of a particular book they've written but also approval of their decision to be a writer, an acknowledgment of their inherent talent.

In my view, most of the debate about positive and negative reviews is misguided not only because it oversimplifies but because it proceeds according to mistaken assumptions about the objective of reviews, and of criticism in general. Reviews should not be written as a kindness to either readers or writers but as a contribution to the continued relevance and vitality of literature. While many reviews may be no more than a transitory register of unreflective opinion or superficial pronouncement (at times no more than perfunctory plot summary), others offer

genuine insight into the immediate context and the aesthetic effect of the book under review, and the very best also help maintain the continuity of literature by declining to write about a new book as if it has arrived shorn of all connection to the writer's other work and to important literary history.

A reviewer can't be sure, of course, that the work being reviewed will have lasting importance. The presumption arguably should be that it won't. However, the reviewer should also presume that a book presenting itself as a serious literary work deserves to be regarded as such, but also needs to be honestly assessed when it falls short of its ambition. Ultimately both readers and writers can only benefit from this kind of effort when carried out in good faith, even if it is not directly made on behalf of the well-being or convenience of either.

Staying Positive

A reviewer of Joanna Ruocco's *Dan* tells us that

Reading *Dan* is like having a bot worm medically expelled from your body. You suspected there was something wrong, something in you that wasn't right, and by mysterious ways of medical linguistics Ruocco has not only identified the parasite, but found it in the deep recesses of your soul and pulled it out through your tear ducts for you to see and examine. Or perhaps reading *Dan* is more like the act of having your ears cleaned. With each page a tube is stuck deeper within your drum and Dan mounts, pushing warm alien water into your skull, pulling out chunks of orange gunk so big you end up questioning your true size. I conceived my ear canal to be X size. But, my god, my ear canal is triple X. And dear lord can I hear better. After reading *Dan* you'll hear things in the way you speak, in the way others speak, that you simply did not hear before.

It is admirable that the reviewer wishes to convey a sense of what reading this novel is like. That is, in my opinion, the most important task a conscientious reviewer undertakes. Too often reviewers take this task to require plot summary--indeed, many reviews are presented as nothing but plot summary, with perhaps a spicing of judgment to give the review some suitable critical flavor. Description, however, goes deeper than plot summary, attending instead to the author's way of telling the story, to the effects of point of view, the particularities of style, to not just the narrative but the way the narrative has been shaped through a larger conception of form.

Unfortunately, this description of *Dan*, carried out through two rather bizarre extended similes, actually takes attention away from the novel itself and places it on the reviewer: Hey, look at the colorful comparisons I can make, one after the other and stretched out to outrageous length! Perhaps if these similes actually worked, actually captured some important feature of the novel under review, the device would be justified, but these similes are so labored, so opaque, it's difficult to know exactly what they're supposed to illuminate. Why a bot worm, exactly? (I'll confess I had to Google the thing to even know what a bot worm is.) Surely the medical linguistics can't be so "mysterious"—linguistics is a science, isn't it?—that whatever the reviewer means by this term can't be identified more specifically, and how can this process be first of all expelling the worm from the reader's body, then turning to "the deep recesses of your soul" only to wind up more corporeally pulling the worm through the tear ducts? The second simile, about pages sprouting tubes and sticking them in the reader's ear, is so thoroughly confused I don't know what it's trying to suggest at all.

This sort of out-of-control figurative description is not the norm, of course. It is distressingly indicative, however, of an apparent belief that subjective impressions expressed in sufficiently "vivid" language can substitute for actual analysis in book reviews. Probably this assumption arises from the further belief that book reviews of fiction function precisely as the register of subjective impression, balanced by the "objectivity" of plot summary. But where does criticism enter into the agenda of book reviewing? If we believe the review has a critical function, if it is not simply an auxiliary of publishing and publicity, it can't just be a "personal response" more often than not meant to celebrate the book under review. At some point there must be some closer reading that attempts to account for the work's success or failure, not to record the reviewer's feelings in ostentatious and overheated prose.

The notion that the primary purpose of a book review is to be "lively," that it should itself be a "fine piece of writing," might seem unobjectionable, especially if you regard reviewing as journalism more than criticism. Perhaps this admonition does discourage reviewers from becoming too pedantic, but at its core, I believe, is an implicit assumption that all criticism is pedantry, so that liveliness and attitude (the former manifesting the latter) takes the place of any real critical scrutiny. At its worst, such an assumption is reflected most acutely in reviews like the one I have quoted, in which the groping after verbal cleverness overwhelms even coherent

communication. But even when kept under better control, the attempt to produce "a fine piece of writing" in the guise of a book review still draws more attention to the reviewer endeavoring to produce it than the book the review presumably should explicate. This is not criticism by any definition, just self-indulgence.

Although this is a "positive" review, if I were the author of the book I wouldn't be very happy with it, since it doesn't give the reader a very clear account of it at all. Real critical engagement with a book, engagement that is reflected in the seriousness with which the reviewer attempts to translate it into a suitably critical language, is preferable to hazily-expressed, if superficially "lively" approval.

In a riposte to Jessa Crispin's complaint that a besieged literary culture has been too quick to "close ranks," leading some review editors to prefer only positive reviews, Bethanne Patrick wants to remind us that "Positive reviews, well-written and carefully thought out, certainly are part of criticism" (*Literary Hub*, May 13, 2016). This is, of course, correct, and Patrick does not suggest that, conversely, negative reviews are somehow not part of criticism. Indeed, she confesses to engaging in excessive "boosterism" in her own efforts as editor and book reviewer, but ultimately declines the role of "book cheerleader," an inclination to which does indeed characterize a great deal of what is called "literary journalism," and the performance of which too often substitutes for actual literary criticism in both print and online publications.

A positive review does not have to be merely an instance of book cheerleading, however. I would argue that a genuinely "carefully thought out" positive review can be harder to do well than a negative review, since writing a review of a book one finds disappointing, or even actively dislikes, focuses a critic's attention in a way that can be more difficult when trying to account for what one likes in a good book. Those qualities that contribute to a work's failure of interest are likely to make themselves felt distinctly over the duration of the reading experience, leaving the critic with a fairly acute perception of what went wrong in the work. A successful book, a book that consistently engages attention and fulfills its aesthetic ambitions, can challenge the critic to go beyond generic praise and empty accolades, to summon a critical language that doesn't simply repeat, in different variations, "This is a good book."

The most common type of positive review, to be found across the spectrum of available critical opinion, from personal blogs to front page reviews in the *New York Times Book Review*, employs the rhetoric of extravagant, hyperbolic acclamation, usually leaning heavily on a few all-purpose terms of fulsome praise: "astonishing;" "incandescent;" "rapturous;" "stunning." Most of these terms are more or less interchangeable, and are used so frequently in so many different contexts that they have essentially become meaningless. Unfortunately, most reviews that use such language rely on it as their primary mode of appraisal, at most adding further plot summary, as if reminding us of the story or summing up characters will suffice as illustration of the pertinence of these hopelessly nebulous adjectives as applied to the book at hand.

This sort of review implicitly accepts the conception of reviews as consumer guides, advice to the reader about whether a book is worth his/her time and money. It affirms the evaluative function of criticism (as, of course, does the negative review as well) at the expense of the descriptive function, at least if "description" means more than highlighting and recapitulating narrative content. If newspaper book reviews—to the extent they survive—are not likely to ever abandon this model, reviews in cultural magazines, literary journals, and online generally have no particular reason to embrace it, and thus we could expect reviews from these sources to more often incorporate the descriptive function of criticism, to more fully convey to the reader an impression of the critic's own experience of reading. In this context, a positive review doesn't just commend a book to its potential readers or offer praise and approval to the author (although it could do both of these things), but tries to make manifest the "imaginative qualities" the critic has fathomed in that actual thing—the literary work—readers now and in the future might more fruitfully appreciate

This means the most valuable skill the critic can bring to the consideration of books, specifically poetry or fiction, is the ability to pay close but also receptive attention—receptive especially to goals and strategies that might seem unfamiliar or unorthodox. Simply calling such a strategy "incandescent" without explaining how it works (or why it prompts a metaphor that invokes giving off light rather than, say, an auditory metaphor) doesn't really help us assimilate its intention or effect. Similarly, a negative review that dismisses an unfamiliar strategy simply because it is unfamiliar does no service either to the book in question or to the efficacy of literary criticism. This sort of reflexively dismissive negative review is arguably even more useless as

criticism than the cheerleading panegyric. An enthusiastic but opaque positive review can be correct in its judgment if inadequate in its justification; an uncomprehending negative review provides no reason to take it seriously to begin with.

A well-executed positive review performs an entirely legitimate function of literary criticism. It offers a sort of baseline affirmative analysis that other reviews or critical essays might need to challenge, although not necessarily in an explicit way. To the extent that an intelligent contemporaneous review of a novel that continues to attract readers and critical attention into the future forms a part of the lasting critical discourse about that novel, criticism later readers might consider, a "carefully thought out" positive review would play its part in the study, formal or informal, of the work. Less tangibly, a convincing positive review partly determines the tenor of the conversation about a new book, in some cases no doubt directly affecting the consensus of opinion about it. Negative reviews do this as well, of course, but this is most likely with a prominent "takedown" kind of review. Since positive reviews of fiction usually outnumber negative reviews, a good one needs to be especially good to stand out.

In Practice

Matter

John Domini's *The Sea-God's Herb* is first of all a collection of lively book reviews (supplemented with a few longer essays) covering almost forty years of Domini's work as a literary critic in such venues as *The New Republic*, the *Boston Globe*, and *Bookforum*, as well as numerous literary magazines and online book reviews. It is consistently engaging, featuring both an appealing, non-technical prose style and a concern for the particulars of the work at hand. The analysis is careful but never heavy-handed, the style of expression clear and vivid. Certainly readers can disagree with Domini's assessment of any of the writers or books he discusses, but surely few will conclude that he fails to support his judgments.

But such a book also prompts questions beyond the quality of writing or the level of discernment on display. Indeed, since *The Sea-God's Herb* exhibits both style and intelligence in abundance, these questions are only more pertinent: When does a book review achieve the status of "literary criticism"? Can book reviews have long-term value transcending their origins in the immediacy of initial response? Can the best reviews help shape the critical reputation of

important writers and their work, or help identify deserving writers and books destined to receive serious critical attention? In short, can reviews contribute to literary discussion something more lasting than a fleeting judgment based on “taste” or inherently subjective standards?

These are particularly pressing questions at a time when literary criticism other than the book review is effectively non-existent. The conception of “criticism” as the rigorous analysis of literary works was long ago ceded to academic critics as their rightful domain, but equally long ago academic criticism ceased to be primarily concerned with the analysis of literary works—or, more precisely, became preoccupied with analyzing everything but the work itself, preferring the historical, the political, and the cultural to the literary. (In the latest iteration of the “new” in academic criticism, so-called “digital humanities,” text-mining scholars using computer analysis to provide “data” about literary works have essentially made the individual text disappear via “distant reading,” an approach that provides us with quantitative knowledge of an entity called “literature” that makes reading it in any particular manifestation almost superfluous.) If criticism as the assessment of “literary” value is to remain a visible practice, book reviewing may be the only form it can now plausibly take.

Perhaps it is not necessary that literary criticism remain a visible presence. There are those who contend that criticism is an impediment to creating a vibrant “literary community,” especially when it results in too many negative reviews. It is hard to imagine that such a community would continue to be vibrant for very long, however, without the more disinterested perspective provided by honest criticism, which of course does not have to be relentlessly negative to be rigorous. Domini’s reviews demonstrate what would be lost if conscientious criticism disappeared.

A few of them are indeed negative, but they provide sound reasons for the unfavorable judgments reached. Just as importantly, the favorable reviews support their evaluations with the same kind of care. Ultimately *The Sea-God’s Herb* is an implicit defense of contemporary innovative fiction (of the sort usually labeled “postmodern”), so Domini’s fundamental critical stance is one of advocacy on behalf of the work he reviews, but the occasional less admiring assessments only strengthen the credibility of his judgments overall, reassuring us that his praise isn’t empty and that his objections aren’t mere carping. One would think this kind of scrupulous appraisal would only strengthen literary culture, not introduce unwelcome scrutiny.

If bringing careful attention to those qualities of a work of fiction that make it successful or not according to discernible standards is a primary feature of literary criticism, surely the reviews collected in *The Sea-God's Herb* qualify as genuine criticism, while still finally providing the more general and cogent sort of assessment we expect in book reviews. And, as these reviews have been gathered to make a larger point about (mostly) American postmodern fiction, they also prove relevant beyond their retrospective interest as the registers of contemporaneous response to books now, in some cases, still widely known, in other cases in danger of being forgotten. Some revising and refocusing of the reviews in their original form has been necessary to make the argument more apparent and to integrate the reviews with each other more effectively. They have also been arranged for structural effect, but the reviews show enough consistency of purpose already that it seems likely most of them were written with this larger purpose—to highlight unconventional fiction and clear up common misconceptions about it—in mind to begin with.

Domini frames his argument by beginning with an essay from 2010, “Against the ‘Impossible to Explain,’” that makes a more general case that literary criticism “just hasn’t been doing its job” in grappling with adventurous fiction, either largely ignoring it or repeating the canard that it is too far removed from readers’ common experience. The latter complaint seems especially objectionable to Domini, who uses the bulk of the essay to look at the work of three writers who exemplify his contention that postmodern fiction does have “a relationship to the rough and tumble in which we live,” that it can be “socially relevant.” While *The Sea-God's Herb* does not extend this thesis in an explicit, systematic way, the emphasis in most of Domini’s considerations of fiction manifesting “an unconventional approach” (not all of which could be called, strictly speaking, “postmodern”) is on showing that unconventional does not mean detached from social realities. Introducing and maintaining this focus allows Domini to avoid producing a book that would otherwise be, as he puts in his preface, “a mere miscellany.”

Domini organizes the contents chronologically, beginning with a group of reviews dedicated to what could be called the first generation of American postmodernists such as John Barth, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon (“Early Tide”), then proceeding to their immediate successors such as Stephen Dixon and Gilbert Sorrentino (“Second Tide”) and their more recent inheritors of the postmodern spirit (“Fresh Tide,” “Coming Tide”). There is also a section

devoted to non-American writers (“Distant Moons”) as well as a handful of essays on other genres and a concluding analysis of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, which Domini believes shares with postmodern fiction the motif of “transformation” and from which the book gets its title (the sea-god’s herb being the agent of such transformation). The organization allows the book to be both a form of theme and variation, illustrating the points made in the introductory essay, and a kind of anatomy of innovative fiction as practiced in the last 40 years.

The early postmodernists are probably still the writers most associated with the term “postmodern” and those most notorious for authoring the kind of “experimental” fiction that proved so difficult for convention-centered literary critics and reviewers to assimilate, leading to charges that their work was inaccessible or contrived or even frivolous (“playing games” is a common accusation against these writers’ approach). Domini’s review of John Barth’s *Letters* not only considers a quintessential postmodernist but also one of Barth’s novels most often dismissed as excessive in its metafictional antics. But Domini maintains that this outrageously metafictional novel (featuring letters written to “John Barth” by characters from his own previous fiction) is also very much engaged with “real-world” concerns, its ultimate seriousness of purpose indicated in the subtitle Domini gives the review, “The Moral Fiction of John Barth.” This is probably a riposte to John Gardner’s *On Moral Fiction*, in which Barth is one of the prominent writers Gardner attacks for lacking sufficient moral seriousness. Domini’s analysis of *Letters* attempts to show that it is in fact suffused with serious social relevance and, pace Gardner, addresses fundamental moral questions, engaging with “the world of social conscience and physical pain.” Domini also believes this to be true of Thomas Pynchon’s novels, but his review of *Vineland* is considerably less receptive to this book than to *Letters*, and he compares it unfavorably to Pynchon’s previous work, finding it “ordinary in its conception and sentimental in its conclusions,” the latter judgment even in its disapproval, however, giving credit to Pynchon for more emotional resonance than some of his early critics often did.

The subsequent sections of the collection offer similarly alert analyses of both the strengths and weaknesses of the works under review. The negative reviews usually express disappointment at unfulfilled potential, not lack of sympathy with the author’s project. In one instance, Domini does seem to take issue with the writer’s methods but allows us subsequently to see how he came to change his mind. In a review of Stephen Dixon’s 1984 story collection *Time*

to Go, Domini seems to associate Dixon with the “understatement” typical of minimalism, charging it with “a lack of imagination and a near absence of passion.” Ten years later, in a review of Dixon’s novel *Interstate*, Domini reverses himself, calling the novel “a work of rare imagination.” Like the previous book, *Interstate* is “an exercise in style” (but also one of “raw emotionality”), except now Domini sees that the style “may harmonize now and again with Raymond Carver’s minimalism. . .but. . .also groans more openly and rambles more furiously.” This characterization of Dixon’s style is quite aptly put, but by now most readers of Stephen Dixon would probably also maintain that Dixon’s style in *Interstate* is pretty consistent with the style of the earlier book. These two reviews show us, first of all, that something like minimalism, with its “repression of rhetoric and an emphasis on the trivial,” is the antithesis of the kind of writing Domini wants to celebrate, but also that judgment is fallible, subject to revision and reconsideration.

If in assembling his reviews for effect Domini is commendably willing to reveal his own potential misjudgment, he also courts the possibility that his evaluation of lesser-known and more recent writers will not hold up to time and the shifting fortunes of literary reputation. The reviews of Jay Cantor, Jaimy Gordon, and Lance Olsen help to identify a later cohort of postmodern-leaning writers who may be destined to remain in the shadow of their formidable predecessors, but perhaps they also make some readers aware how far that shadow extends. It surely extends as far as the most recent writers Domini discusses, such as Brian Evenson, Matt Bell, and Blake Butler, although Domini also points out resemblances with Robbe-Grillet and Beckett. In his assessment of the stories of Dawn Raffel, Domini seems to adjust his perception of minimalism—probably the most significant “ism” in postwar American fiction following on postmodernism—as a regressive practice, freely calling Raffel a minimalist but one whose style “depends on subtle verbal manipulations like that of poetry. . .more about the development of an image than increments in narrative movement.” In this way, Raffel’s stories succeed in “clearing new ground,” the attempt to do which is the animating impulse in all of the fiction Domini most admires.

“Clearing new ground,” of course, recalls the modernist imperative to “make it new,” and the invocations throughout the book of Joyce, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, and Kafka remind us that postmodernism in American fiction was the revival of modernism, its continuation, not its

replacement or repudiation. This was the argument made explicitly by John Barth in attempting to situate his own work and that of his experimental colleagues, insisting they were all concerned with extending the adventurous aesthetics of modernism. Domini stresses the salience of the modern in the postmodern in his essay on Donald Barthelme, which maintains that despite the preoccupation in Barthelme's fiction with contemporary mass culture, it is rooted in the influence of the modernists, arguing that "echoes from the past third of [the 20th] century inform the larger purposes of his work, and help define his place in contemporary fiction." The inclusion of this essay in *The Sea-God's Herb* can be taken both as additional commentary on an important American postmodernist and a reminder that the efforts of a writer like Barthelme are not an aberration in literary history but a renewal of similar efforts by previous writers discontented with conventional storytelling and decorous prose, a legacy of literary invention that presumably the younger writers Domini surveys have inherited.

The section of the book devoted to a group of non-American writers including W.G. Sebald and Italo Calvino serves to show that this legacy is not limited to English-language fiction, although the remaining sections, one loosely focused on the Italian/Italian-American artistic sensibility as reflected in various cultural forms (allowing Domini to apply his critical skills to works of popular culture) and the commentary on Dante, feel less integrated with the primary analysis of contemporary fiction. The former seems too much an interruption of Domini's examination of literary questions, while the latter, despite Domini's belief that the *Divine Comedy* bears important affinities with postmodern fiction, provides a weak, muffled conclusion to the book. Rather than reinforcing the main points about innovative fiction, or the critical approach Domini has taken, by turning his attention instead to a writer and text he reveres and obviously knows well, Domini leaves more the impression of his own personal enthusiasm for Dante, and of his breadth as a critic, than of a summary statement about properly appreciating unconventional fiction.

One might quibble with other limitations of *The Sea-God's Herb* as well. Some of the reviews are so brief they don't really manage either to say something substantial about the work at hand or contribute much to the book's implicit argument. These reviews seem to have been included for the sake of a greater completeness in representing Domini's career as a reviewer, less because they stand on their own as literary criticism. And while certainly Domini is often an

eloquent writer and skilled phrasemaker, there are times when it seems to me he substitutes colorful figurations for more extended analysis and description. In a review of Robert Coover and John Hawkes, he concludes:

. . . Thus both these books make litter of the literal. Both put the match to time and space, and to ordinary morality as well, and then color the flame with pain and desire.

America's literary avant-garde. . . has rarely so goosed the mundane.

Making "litter of the literal" or "goosing" the mundane call more attention to the reviewer's wordsmithing than the actual features of the books under review, and the metaphorical match is so bright it obscures the qualities it is supposed to be illuminating. Of course, book reviews are not exercises in academic criticism, but this book as a whole is rigorous enough in its dedication to explaining the real ambitions of unconventional writing that somewhat more rhetorical rigor in specific reviews would not really seem out of place.

Domini's estimation of particular books or writers is not beyond challenge. I myself can't agree with his assessment of Gilbert Sorrentino, about whom Domini includes two essays. Domini overrates *Blue Pastoral*, one of Sorrentino's minor novels, while vastly underrating his magnum opus, *Mulligan Stew*, in my view one of the most important postmodern novels ever written. Domini does appropriately value Sorrentino's final three short novels, *Little Casino*, *Lunar Follies*, and *A Strange Commonplace*, but in order to maintain his emphasis on the social and ethical qualities of postmodern fiction he underplays their radical formal strategies to stress their "reassertion of emotional content" compared to works such as *Mulligan Stew*. Gilbert Sorrentino is perhaps the experimental writer who poses the greatest challenge to Domini's thesis that "emotional content" is as central to postmodern fiction as formal and stylistic audacity. Domini is right to say that Sorrentino's depiction of human behavior is often grim and unforgiving, that he is in some ways "our poet of bitterness," but what nevertheless makes his fiction a pleasure to read are the formal and stylistic escapades (Sorrentino's work could probably with justice be called "game-playing"), usually employed to very broad comic effect. If rescuing Sorrentino for Domini's larger argument requires dismissing his most representative work while accentuating the least typical elements of his work as a whole, one might be led to wonder whether Domini's sympathy with experimental writing fully extends to perhaps the most resolutely experimental of postmodern writers.

Such a disagreement does not make John Domini a less reliable guide to the broader currents of unconventional writing over the past 40 or so years. Readers familiar with postmodern fiction will probably think about it differently after reading *The Sea-God's Herb*, while readers less disposed toward it might reconsider their skepticism. More importantly, this book demonstrates that book reviews can have more than transitory value. Undeniably perceptive when they first appeared, these reviews continue to provide insight. The collection offers an informative introduction to an important strain of contemporary fiction, but also advances an interpretation of that fiction reflecting a coherent critical perspective. For those who think of the book review as a form of consumer advice or journalistic reportage, it should also make clear that, in the right hands, reviews can be serious literary criticism.

Anti-Matter

B. R. Myers's critique of Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* (*The Atlantic*, 2007) essentially amounts to these two complaints: a) Johnson is not a psychological realist, and b) there are passages in the book that Myers doesn't like. To my mind, neither of these points is relevant to an honest assessment of Johnson's novel, and thus Myers's "review" should be read as another installment in his "manifesto" against contemporary fiction and its readers and should not be confused with actual criticism of *Tree of Smoke*.

In his admitted ignorance of Johnson's other fiction, Myers finds it a crippling flaw that this latest novel does not "depict characters with extraordinarily rich and complex inner lives." Myers warns potential readers of *Tree of Smoke*: "Anyone expecting a psychological novel from characters so lacking in complexity deserves to be disappointed." But what if, in fact familiar with Johnson's other books, we don't expect this latest one to be a "psychological novel"? What if we have concluded that Johnson's strengths as a writer don't lie in detailing the "extraordinarily rich and complex inner lives" of his characters? And what if this is so because Johnson so often portrays characters who lack an ability to reflect much on their actions, whose lives seem propelled by forces they don't control or who get caught up in events they can't foresee? What if in taking up a Denis Johnson novel we just don't think Henry James is a particularly apt touchstone in beginning to evaluate it?

And then there are Johnson's putative lapses in style. I'm prepared to believe that in a book as long as *Tree of Smoke* there will be some sluggish moments, some stylistic treading of

water, or even that in this particular novel Johnson's subject has not called out the best in his prose style. However, I can't rely on Myers's analysis in order to entertain these possibilities, mainly because he doesn't provide any analysis. Most of the examples of bad writing he cites are condemned for their lack of psychological astuteness—surely a colonel would never use an "artsy compound adjective thrown in with profanity and genteelisms"—for trivial "mistakes" in word choice—apparently one must never use the word "bric-a-brac" if Vietnamese villagers are in the vicinity—for insufficient knowledge of physics—"Could someone standing in such a noisy place hear even his heartbeat, let alone his pulse?"—or an overreliance on "startling word combinations"—one's pulse shouldn't "snicker" and one's sweat shouldn't "creak"—but rarely are they examined in any detail or with much insight. Frankly, many of the passages Myers cites seem pretty ok to me. But because I don't share Myers's assumptions about how a novelist's words "should mean something," I guess I'm just one of those who "contribute to the rot" of the King's English.

Certainly Myers does almost nothing to demonstrate that Johnson's prose style actually is deficient, aside from quoting a number of passages and making some irritated remarks about them. He assumes we will agree with him that the passages are indeed bad, but I don't, or at least I want some close reading of them that points out their particular flaws. Instead I get this, about one extended sample of "bad prose":

It is not always easy to tell whether Johnson is being serious or merely unfunny, but I sense no irony here. Rather than disdain Edward's puerile humor and self-importance, we are to share his condescension toward a society that would never "get" his lampoon, which, by the way, has little chance of being off-color with an "unmountable" lead (another case of Johnson canceling out his own words). We are also to accept that although Edward is now the kind of man who lets puppies starve to death, and is something of a sociopath to boot, his experiences afford him unique insight into Philippine society. In a mad world only the madmen are sane, and all that. . . .

Note that what is supposed to be an example of bad prose turns out to be a criticism of one character's "puerile humor and self-importance" and of the notion that "in a mad world only the madmen are sane," etc. Nothing in Myers's commentary is an examination of style. Perhaps he tells me that I might not like this particular character or that the underlying theme is banal (both a

matter of individual judgment of course, each requiring a separate critical argument), but he tells me nothing about Denis Johnson as a stylist. In fact, there is nothing in Myer's review that suggests to me that he knows anything at all about what makes for an effective prose style, nor that he read *Tree of Smoke* in order to fairly appraise it for what it is trying to accomplish rather than find in it what he wanted to find--an excuse to engage in more splenetic denunciation of contemporary fiction.

Myers's review serves to remind us that he doesn't much care for contemporary fiction. (Although, having read *A Reader's Manifesto* as well as several of his subsequent reviews, I still don't really know why.) I'm not sure, however why the *Atlantic's* book editor otherwise thought it was something worth publishing. As a piece of literary criticism, it's pretty wretched.

At the blog *Wet Asphalt*, "J.F. Quackenbush" defends Myers against his critics (which, of course, includes me) by arguing that, read comprehensively (a courtesy Myers himself was not willing to extend to Denis Johnson when reviewing *Tree of Smoke*), Myers is focused on essentially two flaws in contemporary fiction: an overemphasis on "the sentence as a unit of composition" and a concomitant focus on "novelty at the expense of meaning," as well as a kind of slippage between "authorial voice" and "character voice." The latter seems to be Myers's special bete noire, and according to JFQ, is "the one point that his critics have to counter if they want to save Myers' targets from his attacks." Further: "if his critics are going to respond to him, they need to create an argument that supports the trumping by authorial voice. This is something that his critics do not attempt."

As someone who does indeed read fiction more for the "sentences" than for the plot or the "meaning" or whatever it is Myers thinks is being obscured by "too much writing," I am not well-disposed to Myers's reiteration of this complaint. However, to the extent that he is pointing out an overemphasis, as much by critics as by fiction writers themselves, on conventionally "poetic," writing, on prose that, as JFQ puts it, relies on "fresh" imagery in the form of pretty figures of speech (the kind of writing often privileged in writing workshops), I actually agree with some of this line of criticism. "Fine writing" of this sort too often substitutes for more challenging explorations in style and distracts attention from relevant formal considerations (such as point of view).

Unfortunately, Myers's review of *Tree of Smoke* offers no evidence that this sort of stylistic vapidness is what he has in mind in lamenting the dominance of the sentence in contemporary prose. The sentences Myers isolates are either accompanied by no stylistic analysis at all, or are criticized for their denotative lapses, as defined by Myers's own schoolmarm-ish principles of "good English": characters do and say things that Myers finds objectionable, are described in terms he can't assimilate, objects and images are deemed inappropriate according to the most narrowly-focused notions of context ("from the villagers' perspective a less appropriate word than bric-a-brac is hard to imagine"), syntax ("Johnson fills the space between purple passages by dropping his sentence subjects, leaving bursts of adjectives to stand alone") and word choice ("As for snickering and creak, they will please only those who skim for startling word combinations"). Just as often his judgments are simply wrong. There's nothing "slapdash" about this sentence: "Listening for his murderers, he became aware of the oppressive life of the jungle, of the collective roar of insects, as big as any city's at noon." This seems to me a perfectly coherent account of the character's state of mind at this moment, and I do not in the least have to "linger over" these words "in order to make sense of them."

Myers is finally not at all interested in "style" as that word can be meaningfully applied to works of literature. His bilious examination of Denis Johnson's sentences ultimately can be reduced to the charge that Johnson doesn't understand the "proper use of words," doesn't obey the rules governing "application of word to thing" that Myers wants so desperately to enforce. He understands style to mean "which words are right for a given context" and thus the most damning indictment he can make of a writer like Denis Johnson is that "he does not respect words enough to think they should mean something," a formulation by which "meaning" is construed in the most literal, predetermined, unimaginative of ways. Fiction writers should get it "right," should find what's "proper" in their choice of words, should make sure they correctly evoke the plain meaning of words and represent the transparent relationship of "word to thing." Any writing that isn't pristine in this fussy Myersian mode is, per se, overwriting.

This indignation about writing that refuses to tame itself in a manner acceptable to B.R. Myers is related to JFQ's second point about "voice." JFQ elaborates:

The argument runs that an author's voice ought to subsume itself to the voice of a character at all times through a book rather than pushing through and printing itself on

the characters. The reason that an author ought to do this is that not doing so displays a lack of the multivalence that characterizes novels and a lack of sensitivity to difference in the human condition as evidenced in language.

This is really quite an astonishingly autocratic dictate: "an author's voice ought to subsume itself to the voice of a character at all times." It necessarily restricts an author using 3rd-person narration to a formulaic version of "psychological realism" in which the author's prose style "subsume[s] itself to the voice of a character," whether that "voice" is literally the character's way of speaking or more broadly the "voice" in which the character's subjective perception is expressed. (Presumably this restriction would be eased for 1st-person narratives, as long as the "voice" is plausibly the voice of the character as well, and not just a fancy or idiosyncratic style imposed by the author--but then isn't narrative voice always imposed by the author?) It essentially eviscerates the concept of literary style itself, since the writer's prose is reduced to its most functionary role, as the medium in which the character's manner of thought and speech is reflected as transparently as possible.

As for "multivalence": How multivalent is Hemingway's fiction? Faulkner's? No two writers could have more contrasting prose styles, but what they do have in common is that their work does have a distinctive style. In both cases, I would argue, the author's own voice "push[es] and print[s] itself on the characters." If this were not the case, we would have no reason to consider Hemingway's "style" to have been as revolutionary as it in fact was, since he wouldn't be using his autistically laconic style for deliberate effect but merely to "reflect" the thinking of a series of autistically laconic characters. And what about those characters in Faulkner's work who "think" in Faulkner's own circuitous, declamatory style? Is Faulkner to be removed from the pantheon of American writers because in retrospect he failed to observe the Myers Rules of Decorum? Did he show "a lack of sensitivity to difference in the human condition as evidenced in language"? For that matter, how "multivalent" is the fiction of, say, Virginia Woolf, one of the great psychological realists? Even when she's dipping in and out of the consciousness of multiple characters, how aware are we of the individuality of each voice, as opposed to Virginia Woolf and her fluent prose style in the process of dipping?

A writer who especially challenges the Myers/Quackenbush philosophy of prose style is the American writer Stanley Elkin. No writer in literary history has ever "printed" his own

characteristic style "on the characters" more than Elkin. Here's a passage from his 1983 novel, *George Mills*:

Mills was always thirsty now. Talking to his horse, coaxing him along the orbit of the salt carousel, his tongue flecked with salt dust, his throat burned raw with the dry pebbles, gagging and talking baby talk, horse talk, nonsense, philosophy. He did not know what the other horse talkers told their beasts--the merchant was disinterested; it made him drowsy, he said, to listen; he did not like, he said, to stay long in the farm--because they spoke in what Mills did not even know was Polish, and in addition to his constant thirst, to the annoyance caused him by his great raw burning and wounded mouth, to his stinging eyes and smarting, salt-oiled skin like the sticky, greasy glaze of ocean bathers, there was the problem of finding things to say to it, of saying them, getting them out through the hair-trigger emetic atmosphere of his throat and mouth. And in the mitigated light, watery, milky as the hour before sunrise save where the torches, igniting salt, exploded into a showerwork of sparkler ferocity, white as temperature. But mostly the talk, what to say.

Here's another from his 1971 novel, *The Dick Gibson Show*:

By now he had enough experience in radio to handle anything. He was an accomplished announcer, a newsman, an MC, an actor. He could do special events, remotes, panel discussions. He had a keen ear for which songs and which recordings of which songs would be the hits, and was even a competent sports announcer. Though he had not yet broadcast a game from the stadium, he had done several off the Western Union ticker tape, sitting in a studio hundreds of miles from the action and translating the thin code of the relay, fleshing it out from the long, ribbonary scorecard. More than anything else this made him feel truly a radio man, not just the voice of radio itself, the very fact of amplification, the human voice lifted miles, beamed from the high ground, a nexus of the opportune. See seven states! And everything after the fact so foreknown, the game itself sometimes already in the past while he still described it; often the afternoon papers were on the streets with the final box score while he described for his listeners the seventh-inning stretch or reported a struggle in the box seats over the recovery of a foul

ball--his foreknowledge hindsight, a coy tool of suspense: "DiMaggio swings. That ball is going, going, oh, it's foul by inches."

Both of these passages are ebullient, robust, bordering on excessive. (In my opinion, gloriously so. In his later work, Elkin's prose style became if anything more mannered, more extravagant, as if over the course of his career he'd learned to shrug off the nagging demands of character development, point of view, and plot construction to concentrate solely on the still untapped resources of writing itself.) They contain truly novel and "fresh" images--"the hair-trigger emetic atmosphere of his throat." Neither of them bother with the distinction between "author voice" and "character voice," neither of them bow to the commands of critics urging "multivalence." It's all Elkin, even Dick Gibson, who is after all a radio "voice" of great skill but who ultimately still speaks Elkinese. In the literary world of B.R. Myers's dreams, we would presumably be rid of writers like Stanley Elkin, in my opinion one of the great writers of the post-World War II era. Anyone who is inclined to give Myers's criticism of contemporary fiction the benefit of the doubt should take that warning under advisement.

Readers like B.R. Myers and J.F. Quackenbush are of course entitled to their preference for writers who toe the stylistic line, who are careful not to intrude too much prose onto their prose styles. But no one should accept their criticism of writers who don't provide this service as anything but a stentorian defense of their preferences. If they don't like writers who write too much, they should stay away from them and not elevate their intolerance of style into some sort of universal principle of literary correctness, even as they degrade the role of the book reviewer by reducing it to the grumblings of a petulant schoolmaster.

At times it becomes quite obvious when reviews written by novelists or poets have been taken as an opportunity to pass negative judgment on work whose assumptions about writing simply diverge from the reviewer's own. A good example of this might be the *New York Times* review by Michael Cunningham of Rikki Ducornet's *Netsuke*. After faintly praising Ducornet's novel, Cunningham instructs us that

By delving into a character's motives, a writer fulfills one of fiction's most powerful potentials — the ability to draw the reader into a character, including the most

repellent of them. Fiction can show readers what it's like to be someone very different from themselves, even if that drawing-in is discomfiting.

Ducornet, unfortunately, "has erred too much on the side of discretion":

The pure malice of Ducornet's [protagonist] is not alleviated by her reluctance to show us much by way of the injuries he's inflicting on his patients. Ducornet treats the analyst's patients as offhandedly as does the analyst himself. The book's atmosphere of arid heartlessness begins to produce a parched feeling in the reader.

Cunningham's review betrays a lack of sympathy with the aesthetic goals of Ducornet's novel, goals that clearly clash with his own--"to draw the reader into a character"--and this unwillingness to accept a kind of fiction different from that which he writes is reinforced in the review by an unwillingness to understand what Ducornet's goals may be. He engages in no reflection on what Ducornet might be up to rather than psychological realism, and he considers *Netsuke* in total isolation from the rest of Ducornet's by now rather ample body of work. If Cunningham has read any of Ducornet's previous fiction, his review seems rather determined to avoid any reference to it.

Readers familiar with Rikki Ducornet's fiction know that it does not attempt "to draw the reader into a character" in the manner—adopted, no doubt, from Virginia Woolf—that Michael Cunningham himself favors. This is not because she has no interest in character, but because in her fiction character is just one element that works to help give it its distinctive signature. Ducornet is not a realist, psychological or otherwise, but a fabulator, and were she to focus on drawing the reader inside the characters in the mode of Woolf or Faulkner she would either be undermining the very mode in which she has long worked, or be turning herself into a different kind of writer. Still, to say that Ducornet to some extent subordinates character to plot, setting, symbol and imagery, or, especially, style, is not to say that her fiction shows no concern for the "motives" of its characters. Indeed, long-time readers of Ducornet's work must be taken aback by Cunningham's suggestion that *Netsuke* exhibits insufficient attention to motive, since Ducornet's fiction so relentlessly chronicles what it represents as the motive force behind all human behavior: the unavoidable power of "desire."

In Ducornet's story, "The Word, 'Desire'", the protagonist, who is still experiencing the intense, intoxicating effects of new love, comes to appreciate this power when she notices her lover looking with obvious desire at another woman. She imagines herself into the perspective of both the lover, gazing, and the other woman, being gazed at, and finds herself concluding: "How far the word 'desire' goes! How it tugs us along! How it worries us, daggers us. How it lights our path." Ducornet's fables are fables of the manifestation and the consequences of desire, how it "tugs us along" and both "daggers us" and "lights our path." Her characters are driven by desire, experiencing both ecstasy and pain, come to a healthy acknowledgment of it, disastrously deny it. Desire in such works as *The Stain*, *The Jade Cabinet*, and *Gazelle* leads the characters to both become more human, and, in some cases, descend into the monstrous. Ducornet isn't really interested in showing readers "someone very different from themselves" because this fundamental human motivation is one to which we are all equally subject.

Thus the claim that a novel like *Netsuke* fails to explore "motives" arises both from a weak reading of the book and sheer ignorance, either literal or willed, of Rikki Ducornet's work as a whole. Cunningham asserts that the psychiatrist protagonist acts out of "pure malice" in seducing his patients, that he "systematically and without guilt soul—murders" them. While it is not necessarily surprising that a reader might cringe with horror at the actions of a character like this protagonist (readers have expressed similar distaste for some of the actions and events depicted in her other novels), one might expect Cunningham to examine his response, to more fully appraise the text and more carefully measure his response against what the novel actually conveys to us about the protagonist. Because this character as subject to the inescapable influence of desire as any of Ducornet's other characters. He is not motivated out of "pure malice"--he may be malicious, but the malice isn't pure, uninflected by deeper impulses that are themselves neither benevolent nor malevolent but simply are what they are.

"My clients are thwarted, famished, and lonely," the protagonist tells us. "Inevitably, sooner or later, I seize upon and penetrate the one who has wanted this from me from the first instant. Or has taken time but has come around to wanting it." The narrator both believes what he is doing is of benefit to his clients—it's what they want as an assuagement of their pain—and knows he is exploiting them. He knows also he is exploiting his wife, Akiko, an accomplished and compassionate woman he both loves and despises. In betraying his wife with his clients, the

narrator is acting on desires his marriage can't fulfill—that he doesn't want it to fulfill. Cunningham is correct to say that *Netsuke* is "a story about a man trying to bring his own house down" (although this isn't all the story is about), but this very insight implies he isn't simply acting out of malice. His accomplishments as husband and professional are being overrun by elemental impulses for which those accomplishments are an inhibition and a nuisance. In Ducornet's fiction, carnal desires must and should be expressed, but that doesn't mean the consequences will always be "healthy."

Ducornet admittedly makes it difficult for us to grant the psychotherapist his portion of a shared humanity by making him the narrator of his own story. Novels narrated in the first person by morally compromised characters, such as *Lolita*, Thomas Berger's *Killing Time*, John Hawkes's *The Blood Oranges*, or, more recently, Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* can charm us into a kind of moral complicity in which we come to regard our identification with the narrator with some horror, but can also lead us to recoil at too obvious violations of ethical norms and decorum. We can both lull ourselves into overemphasizing the narrator's "human" qualities, and allow our disgust to overlook them. Judging from Michael Cunningham's response, *Netsuke* can provoke the latter reaction. A first-person narrator is always unreliable to some degree, but some writers especially exploit the capacity for first-person narration to create ambiguity and instability. Rikki Ducornet is this kind of writer. Whenever she uses a first-person narrator, as readers we need to be prepared for, and willing to accept, the resulting ambiguities.

Netsuke, like many of Ducornet's novels, is relatively brief, which also no doubt adds to the possibility it will be misread in the manner exemplified by Michael Cunningham. We don't "get to know" the character as we do in longer works, especially those devoted to the kind of psychological realism in which "getting to know" is largely the point. Ducornet's kind of fabulation, which can draw on the elements of the fable or fairy tale without incorporating the movement toward narrative closure ("the moral of the story"), works best both through brevity and a deliberate avoidance of psychological "depth," at least through explicit strategies of point of view or style. Anything longer could mar the delicacy of what she is after, and "delving into a character's motives" would only undermine its subtlety.

Writers who know that another writer's book is likely to be antithetical to their own artistic assumptions might still be able to comment insightfully on that book, but they ought to at least acknowledge that bias before agreeing to review it.

Justifying Criticism

Motives

In a recent profile of critic Stanley Fish, Fish is quoted as having said, "Literary interpretation, like virtue, is its own reward. I do it because I like the way I feel when I'm doing it." He further amplifies:

You do this kind of work simply because it's the kind of work that you like to do, and the moment you think you're doing it to make either people or the world better, you've made a huge mistake. There's no justification whatsoever for what we do except the pleasure of doing it and the possibility of introducing others to that pleasure. That's it!
(*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2011)

There is, of course, a paradox at work in Fish's formulation: To provide yourself and others with a positive pleasure is, however slightly, to "make. . . people or the world better." Since the pleasure that "interpretation" provides comes from the invigoration of one's mental faculties, it might be said that literary interpretation—literary criticism more generally—performs an especially useful service. But Fish is cautioning against the hubris of believing that literary criticism will perform any service beyond this modest one of engaging the mind in a productive activity.

This view is no doubt uncongenial both to those academic critics who want their work to be an "intervention" in culture that transcends the "merely literary" and to those traditionalists who think that literature itself can make us better, a goal to which the scholar or critic should help lead us. In my view, the "justification" for criticism and interpretation indeed cannot be found outside of the activity itself, although it is certainly true that any particular act of interpretation can prove useful or enlightening for others. And to the extent that the critic intends his/her analysis to be enlightening, this sort of utility could be said to "justify" critical analysis as well. Such analysis might even be narrowly and tendentiously focused, an attempt to "use" the subject text for partisan purposes that go beyond simply understanding or "appreciating" it. But

criticism has then become something other than literary criticism. "Interpretation" as Fish would define it becomes instead the means to some other end, an end deemed more important than simply coming to terms with the text itself.

Fish is perhaps the most well-known literary critic associated with philosophical pragmatism, as descended from John Dewey through Richard Rorty. His version of reader-response theory, in which meaning can only arise "in the reader," is a clear descendant of Dewey's notion of "art as experience." Since the highest pragmatic value is generally considered to be that of utility—an action or belief is justified if it produces an efficacious result—one might think that when applied to literary criticism whatever "use" might be made of a literary text is perfectly acceptable if it works to some desired end, but while of course finally any reader can make "use" of any text in any way he/she wants, this does not mean that all such readings contribute to the integrity of literary criticism understood as a practice or a discipline possessing definitional coherence. Indeed, if any reading can be appropriately considered "literary criticism," then the term has no meaning at all, no object that is its proper concern. Fish is implicitly insisting that the proper concern of criticism is the free play of "interpretation" unconstrained by agendas other than the imperative to carry it out intelligently and attentively. Interpretation of texts that do not themselves communicate meaning fully or directly is what literary critics do, and the most appropriate affirmation of its value comes from the critic who is able to convey "the pleasure of doing it" to responsive readers.

There are, alas, too few critics of this kind around. In my opinion, this is only partly because critics themselves cling too firmly to various non-literary and non-critical agendas. Those in charge of the most widespread source of literary commentary, book review sections of magazines and newspapers, seem seldom to assign works of fiction or poetry to capable, disinterested (as in "impartial") literary critics in the first place. In fact, a significant majority of reviews of novels and poetry collections seem to be written by other novelists and poets, a practice that is apparently founded on the assumption that novelists and poets are in the best position to assess other work in their chosen forms. This is a mistaken assumption.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom observes that "when a potential poet first discovers (or is discovered by) the dialectic of influence, first discovers poetry as being both external and internal to himself, he begins a process that will end only when he has no more

poetry within him, long after he has the power (or desire) to discover it outside himself again." Bloom is acknowledging that while the poet—the fiction writer as well—is initially inspired to write by the discovery of previous writing "external" to his/her own need for expression, eventually he/she finds it difficult to still "discover" poetry in other writers because his/her own work now so thoroughly defines what poetry should be. This is especially true of the best poets and novelists, which all the more makes it a good idea to view even the most accomplished of such writers with suspicion when they turn to reviewing. We will probably acquire more understanding of the reviewer and the reviewer's perspective on his/her own work than we will get a trustworthy account of the book ostensibly under review.

There are, of course, always exceptions. Some writers are also such penetrating critics that one wants to read them even if it is likely the critic's analysis will reveal more about the critic's assumptions than about the subject of the analysis. William H. Gass would be one such writer, but as much as I value Gass's criticism, I would also acknowledge that it is at least as valuable as an adjunct to his fiction, helping to explain the nature of its departures from convention, or as part of a philosophy of literature that works in tandem with the fiction. Certainly Gass engages in this critical work because it his work he "likes to do" (or at least this is the impression his criticism leaves with me), but as much as Gass lends credibility to experimental fiction through his essays and reviews, ultimately such fiction is well-served as well by critics able to more comprehensively assess its failures as well as its successes.

The kind of work novelists and poets most like to do, presumably, is writing novels and poems. They might also like writing reviews perfectly well, but this is inevitably a secondary sort of gratification, and in most cases not something done for "its own reward." My impression of the reviewing done by these writers considered collectively is that all too often it is an opportunity to either question an approach to fiction or poetry that isn't the reviewer's or to praise one's colleagues, perhaps in the hope that such generosity might be reciprocated when the reviewer's own book appears. The first approach is an especially good way to dismiss unconventional fiction that might pose a threat to established practice, while the second helps to build "community," to elevate the status of current writing more generally.

Ultimately none of these motives do current writing much good, however, if it is to be considered as potentially part of "literature," if "literary" is to be a term that designates more than

a lifestyle choice. Judging a work according to principles the work has rejected is hardly criticism in the first place, and seeks to encourage a conformity of method that would really only drain literature of its vitality. "Community" is a pleasant notion that might help to blunt the edges of literary rivalries, but finally it has nothing to do with writing worthy poems and novels. Praising fellow members of one's community for anything other than creating worthwhile literary art is just a free form of publicity and reduces literature to merely another act of social networking. New books need critics willing to regard them as efforts to be taken seriously as literature, to survive in the long run, not just their notices in the weekend's review pages. They need critics who regard criticism as the act of considering books in this way, and who want to engage in it because it's a good thing to do.

Gatekeeping

The concept of "literature" is, of course, inevitably to some extent a social construction; what gets counted as literature is subject to historical shifts and is ultimately determined by contemporaneous social and cultural assumptions. Works of literature and the standards we use to judge them can never actually be timeless or universal in the casual sense in which we often use these words.

And yet judgments about what is good or bad, worthy of attention, "literary" or not aren't entirely socially determined. "Literature" is heavily freighted with the judgments of the past, and present notions of what makes a poem or a novel literary can't escape the influence of the poems and novels that have previously been considered such, even if their influence has resulted in the effort to counteract or negate it. More often, writers attempt to incorporate or creatively transform their influences, so that the work produced by current writers certainly is not free of already established conceptions of the literary as exemplified by the poets and novelists these writers have found important to them. Readers as well are inevitably shaped by the "great books" they have encountered (even if there is disagreement about what those great books are), and their experience of the writing of the present is surely in part conditioned by what these books have prepared them to expect a work of literature to be like.

Skepticism toward the exaltation of Literature, especially when embodied in an unofficial "canon," is expressed by those who feel the concept of literature as we have inherited it is inappropriately exclusive, as well as by those who believe it is still possible to credibly

distinguish between works that are more and less significant, but that setting up inflexible criteria for determining what is literature and what is not actually gets in the way of being able to do so fairly. But of course the canon is in fact unofficial, developed mostly as a pedagogical tool in university curricula, and it has been expanded so thoroughly beyond the narrow conception of a canon that might have existed 50 years ago that to believe it still exerts an unduly restrictive influence on the reading choices of most readers is to live in the past at least as stubbornly as any hidebound traditionalist. And far from being unwelcome in most "serious" literary discussions, genre fiction and other forms of popular narrative have never been as influential on writers trying to blur distinctions between the popular and the literary as they are now, nor as accepted by readers prepared to accept that, say, science fiction or crime fiction can be as "serious" in intent as any work of "literary fiction."

Those who object to the preservation of Literature as a measure of the quality of imaginative writing are really objecting to the perceived influence of critical "gatekeepers," self-appointed arbiters of quality and guardians of the canon. After all, no literary work ever elected itself to the canon. This task has instead been taken up by literary scholars and critics, although of course no particular scholar or critic has ever actually been asked to cast a vote, except insofar as English professors choose certain books rather than others in the courses they teach. If for a while—keeping in mind that the academic study of literature as we know it now became widespread less than a hundred years ago, and thus the canon as we speak of it today is also a century or less old—the choices by and large reflected the demographics of the professors (that is, mostly white and male), this certainly had the effect of restricting canonical literature to an overly narrow range of writers and writing, but the gatekeeping done by this old guard of academic scholars was more likely to be of the sort that worked to distinguish between "major" and "minor" writers, the latter themselves mostly white and male but not as worthy as the former. Certainly it would not have occurred to these scholars to include what we now call genre fiction, and, sadly, women and minority writers were radically underrepresented because it also would not have occurred to this first generation of literary scholars that such writers existed in large enough numbers to warrant much attention.

It would be difficult to maintain that academic literary scholars now play any gatekeeping role at all. The university curriculum is loaded with courses on genre fiction, popular culture,

previously neglected writers of all kinds, as well as courses on canonical texts designed not to foster appreciation but to "interrogate" underlying historical and cultural assumptions, making these works anything but "timeless." Academic literary scholars do not currently patrol the gates protecting literary greatness but have taken down the gates, leaving an open field in which virtually no writing or reading practice is disallowed. If Literature remains an oppressive symbol of elitism and exclusion, it is certainly no longer being perpetuated by academe.

This would leave only non-academic literary critics as the guilty parties responsible for using the pretentious standards of Literature in judging writers' work. Presumably a figure such as James Wood, sometimes regarded as a harsh judge indeed, is the sort of critic who won't let Literature go. But while certainly Wood can be dismissive in his reviews of new work, the standards he applies don't come from Literature per se but reflect his own parochial conception of the proper goals of fiction, standards he habitually applies, finding some books that meet them and, unsurprisingly, many that don't. Perhaps all critics develop fundamental principles by which they exercise their judgment, but Wood takes this to a particularly doctrinaire extreme. Still, if you resist Wood's at times imperious pronouncements, you are not resisting an appeal to the haughty demands of Literature but the requirements of James Wood's tendentious notion of "how fiction works."

Capital-L Literature has been permanently reduced to the lower case, and claims that it still lords over lowly readers just can't be sustained. But to insist that critics and reviewers refrain from making any distinctions or rendering negative judgments amounts to declaring that no standards should be applied. Merely because we no longer believe it necessary to permanently enshrine books and writers worth reading into a canon, or judge all literary works by supposedly timeless standards that hold up all new work to comparison with the "existing monuments" of the past, doesn't mean critical evaluation itself is obsolete. Critics can surely still provide compelling reasons why a given work is more or less successful. Further, those reasons might be informed by familiarity with a few of those literary monuments, not to mention less imposingly monumental works that were nevertheless good and served for the critic (or the reader) as exemplars of possibility in literary art. Perhaps some great works truly are great, and perhaps some books really are better than others.

Taking Sides

In *Better Living Through Criticism*, A.O. Scott first of all demonstrates that he is eminently qualified to be the chief film critic of *The New York Times*. On the basis of what the book reveals about Scott's breadth of knowledge, interpretive skill, and belief in the importance of criticism, we would be justified in concluding that his own reviews, whether we ultimately agree with them or not, are written from a comprehensive understanding of the history and purpose of criticism and with a seriousness of intent that goes beyond the simplistic thumbs up/thumbs down approach to which reviews of popular art in mainstream media are especially prone, as well as the widespread conception of a review as primarily a form of consumer advice. To the extent that we can take *Better Living Through Criticism* as a brief on behalf of the kind of criticism A.O. Scott practices, the kind able to provide "better living," both for critics and for readers, it is accurate enough to call the book a success.

However, if it does succeed in clarifying and, to a degree, justifying the work of a critic such as himself, that very success highlights one of the book's most severe limitations as a guide to criticism at the moment. The case for the sort of job A.O. Scott does increasingly applies only to A.O. Scott and a handful of other critics who have the opportunity to practice a general interest criticism that can be expected both to be taken seriously as an attempt to reckon with works of art (popular or "high") and to do so while reaching a relatively wide audience. As review space in newspapers continues to dwindle, coverage of the arts in general consigned to anodyne puff pieces acting as ersatz advertisements, and print magazines increasingly continue to become "niche" publications, with fewer and fewer niches available to arts criticism, the widespread assumption might be that online publications have taken up much, if not all, of the critical slack. But while it is true that numerous web-based journals (not to mention blogs) have now established themselves as dependable sources of intelligent criticism (in some cases exceeding in its scope and substance what was previously available in print publications), these journals generally have small audiences and their focus is inevitably more narrow, more oriented toward readers with a pre-established, in some cases even selective, interest in the form or subject under consideration. The criticism on these sites is more likely to take for granted that such readers understand and appreciate the importance of criticism than does Scott, who assumes readers skeptical not just of his judgment of a particular film or book but of the very enterprise of passing judgment as a profession.

It would not really be quite accurate to say that in *Better Living Through Criticism* Scott attempts to convince this skeptical reader of the value of criticism, since he doesn't really make an argument at all in the book, its second and even more crippling flaw. Scott ostensibly addresses six different topics in the book's six chapters, but not only do these topics not exactly cohere in a discernible line of argument, but each of the chapters is very discursive, ultimately allowing him to cover a lot of ground, from the history of criticism to the philosophy of beauty to the perennial debate over the role of form vs. content, but this also exacerbates the problem that originates in Scott's extreme reluctance not just to advance a unifying argument but ultimately to take a firm position on any of the issues he raises. Scott sees the wisdom of both sides of most critical debates and typically advises that we accept both, or neither, which for him essentially amounts to the same thing. Sometimes his caution seems nearly metaphysical:

It doesn't matter. Actually, it matters a great deal. It matters more than anything. You are guaranteed to be wrong—to insult good taste, to antagonize public opinion, the judgment of history, or your own uneasy conscience. And there is no beautiful synthesis, no mode or method of criticism that can resolve these contradictions. They cannot be logically reconciled, any more than a safe, sensible middle path can be charted between them. Still less is it possible to declare a decisive allegiance, to cast one's lot with the party of form or the party of content, the armies of tradition or the rebel forces of modernity, the clique of skeptics or the church of enthusiasts.

In seeming to assure us that it does indeed matter that critics are so habitually wrong, Scott appears to posit error as an unavoidable condition of the critic's situation. Yet surely it also matters exactly *how* a critic is wrong. Precisely by asserting a "decisive allegiance" to a particular philosophy of criticism, a particular method, a specific conception of art, the critic commits to the necessity of demonstrating that philosophy or method can reveal why the work of art itself matters, why the reader/viewer/audience should pay attention in a particular way. If the critic succeeds in either or both of these goals, he/she has gotten it right, but only in that, provisionally, the effort has paid off for some readers. If the critic doesn't succeed, the approach could be wrong (especially if no one finds it convincing), or it could be that the critic hasn't done justice to it. (It also remains possible, it must be said, that the reader has gotten it wrong.) A good critic isn't offering a judgment or interpretation to be tallied as right or wrong, correct or

incorrect in the first place, merely as a perspective acute enough to be considered fully and fairly, along with all others. Readers are free to take the critic's offering more or less seriously, but it hardly seems an affront to art, or an abrogation of the critic's duty to an ethereal ideal of "objectivity," that a critic would cast lots with one set of critical principles rather than others.

It is as if Scott can't abandon the conventional journalistic imperative to "cover" a subject by reporting on both sides of disputes about it, without interceding to provide some normative appraisal. But Scott seems to experience this obligation as a struggle, not between the points of view surveyed but within himself, represented most obviously in the interchapters included in the book, presented in the form of a dialogue between the two sides of critic A.O. Scott. These dialogues ultimately leave the book even more rhetorically fragmented, as even the disconnected points Scott does make in the other chapters prove debatable to his skeptical questioner, the ultimate effect of whose questions is essentially to chastise Scott for his presumptions and pretensions in making those points to begin with. These interchapters succeed mostly in diverting attention away from criticism as an intellectual vocation and focusing it instead on A.O. Scott, a paradoxical move for a book that otherwise hesitates to assert a strong thesis or declare a distinctive critical position.

One proposition that Scott is willing to affirm relatively early in the book is the notion that criticism is not just a skill or a craft but itself art, although he is predictably diffident in stating it: "Will it sound defensive or pretentious if I say that criticism is an art in its own right?" he asks in the middle of a paragraph. But he continues: "Not in the narrow, quotidian sense in which art is more or less synonymous with skill, but in the grand, fully exalted, romantic meaning of the word. That the critic is a craftsman of sorts is obvious enough; I want to insist that the critic is also a creator." It is a surprisingly bold claim, but unfortunately Scott's digressive expository strategy doesn't really allow him to support it. Instead he relies on testimony from the like-minded H.L. Mencken, but since Mencken's assertions are themselves not very persuasive, Scott's own case remains unproven. Mencken contends that only by going beyond the "material" provided by art works and "adorn[ing] their theme with variations of his own" can the mere "reviewer" become an actual critic. Putting aside the fact that this is an entirely incoherent conception of criticism (in maintaining that a critic can't become a critic until he stops being a reviewer, it empties "criticism" of its meaning in relation to works of art),

nowhere in *Better Living Through Criticism* does A.O. Scott lay claim to such a conception, confining himself throughout to the assumption that reviews fully qualify as criticism.

Scott seems to me on much firmer ground, however, when he stops grasping after “art” as an honorific boost to his craft and defines criticism in more restrained terms: “[C]riticism, far from sapping the vitality of art, is instead what supplies its lifeblood. . . properly understood is not an enemy from which art must be defended, but rather another name—the proper name—for the defense of art itself.” The direct defense of art—at least in the cumulative sense, through criticism taken as a whole—can only occur through forms of argument and analysis, that is, by using language instrumentally to accomplish a purpose beyond its own fashioning. A work of art has no obligation other than to be itself. A work of criticism that expects to be admired for its own ingenuity or aesthetically fine style (which is not to say that criticism can’t ever be admired for such qualities) in my view has in so doing abandoned the primary obligation of criticism to indeed defend the integrity and value of art, often by defending it in the particular instance of a particular work or artist.

If criticism “contends against [the other arts] for their own benefit,” it does so to challenge art to fulfill its potential, not to set itself up as competition. If it can be “in fact larger” than the other arts considered separately, that is because criticism at its best attempts a synthesis of artistic history and principles to enable its critique of individual forms and specific works. If “there is more of it” than of actual works of art, this is due to the interest so many of us take in art, and our need to account for that interest, not a free-floating compulsion to “adorn” art with critical accessories and flourishes.

Surely the rise of, first, the blogosphere and, subsequently, a relative abundance of online arts reviews and critical web journals attests to this interest. If the sort of critical voice represented by A.O. Scott is likely to be less commanding as the centrality of such cultural touchstones as the *New York Times* continues to erode, we might still look to these new cultural voices—more muted perhaps, but in general much more interested in books or movies or music than in assuming the role of critic-artist—to successfully demonstrate the ongoing value of criticism.

Fillips of Contempt, Wet Kisses—The Role of Online Criticism

While “surfing” the world wide web in late 2003, I began noticing certain websites—they looked more like online diaries—discussing books and writers with an enthusiasm and a seriousness of purpose I was not seeing elsewhere on the web. I then had some nascent ideas of my own about how the online medium could serve more usefully as a forum for serious-minded literary commentary than it had up to that point, and the creators of these websites seemed to have had similar ideas, although understandably they were as yet being applied in somewhat rudimentary ways.

What most made these sites stand out for me was that they were linked to each other, as if this was some kind of network that had been around for a while, an opportunity for like-minded readers to conduct an ongoing discussion about recent books and literary news. Most of this discussion was in the form of relatively brief observations or opinions offered along with numerous hyperlinks, but often the observations were astute and the opinions expressed with sharpness and wit. If this was something that could not exactly be called criticism, it was manifesting an intensity of interest in serious writing—“literature” was usually used without irony—that was clearly not being satisfied by the coverage afforded it by publications in what these bloggers—and these were indeed blogs that I was reading, although I was only vaguely aware of the term—called the “mainstream print media.”

So I decided to see if I might join that network. My goal was to explore the possibility that this new online medium—new, at least, in its focus on literature—could in fact be used to foster creditable literary criticism. In my very first post on my own blog—which I called *The Reading Experience*, drawing on my affinity for John Dewey’s aesthetic philosophy of “art as experience”—I said: “I would like to test the proposition that the internet, in the form of the so-called ‘blogosphere,’ can provide a forum for a new kind of literary criticism, more compact and concise, perhaps, than conventional print lit-crit, but serious criticism nonetheless.” I should say that my background was in academic criticism, but I had recently been writing and publishing more or less general-interest criticism in book reviews and literary magazines, with some hazy notion of becoming a freelance writer, if it was still possible to actually succeed in that ambition. Perhaps this “new kind of literary criticism” would prove to be a worthwhile alternative both to academic criticism, which was no longer receptive to the critical approach I preferred (focusing

on the aesthetic character of literature), and to the precarious practice of newspaper and print magazine book reviewing.

Thus did I find myself participating in the development of the “literary weblog” (most often referred to as the “litblog”) from essentially a kind of public reading diary to a much more flexible medium capable of incorporating the whole array of discursive forms—personal essays, manifestos, reviews, critical analyses, as well as fiction and poetry. This discourse was indeed generally “more compact and concise” than these same forms as they might appear in print, and typically it was characterized by a more informal, often quite conversational tone. But this conversational quality of what came to be known as the “blog post” was directly related to the device that most obviously distinguishes the blog post (or any online writing) from writing in print: the existence and availability of hyperlinks. The ability to direct readers elsewhere as a way of supplementing or supporting the writer’s purpose, of directly counterposing the writing at hand with other voices considering the subject, often voices in dissent as well as support, inherently encourages a conversational, dialogic approach, and many literary bloggers explicitly sought to demonstrate that this sort of literary discussion had its own kind of value.

That value was certainly disputed in the few years it took for the literary blog to evolve and begin to attract the notice of the broader literary culture—editors, critics, publishers, and readers. Notable figures from within that culture rendered pointed and often severe judgments:

Recognition is . . . measured in the number of hits—by their clicks you shall know them—and by the people who bother to respond to your posts with subposts of their own. The lit-bloggers become a self-sustaining community, minutemen ready to rise up in defense of their niches. So it is when people have only their precarious self-respect. But responses—fillips of contempt, wet kisses—aren’t criticism.

Editors, *n + 1*

To listen to the avatars of the New Information Age, the means of communication provided by digital devices and ever-enhanced software have democratized debate, empowered those whose opinions have been marginalized by, or, worse, shut out of mainstream media, and unleashed a new era of book chat. . . .

Steve Wasserman

(“Book chat” was one of the favored words used by critics from the “mainstream media” to belittle the level of discourse they perceived to be characteristic of litblogs.) Sven Birkerts wrote:

The implicit immediacy of the “post” and “update,” the deeply embedded assumptions of referentiality (linkage being part of the point of blogging), not to mention a new-of-the-moment ethos among so many of the bloggers (especially the younger ones) favors a less formal, less linear, and essentially unedited mode of argument. While more traditional print-based standards are still in place on sites like *Slate* and the online offerings of numerous print magazines, many of the blogs venture a more idiosyncratic, off-the-cuff style, a kind of “I’ve been thinking” approach. At some level it’s the difference between amateur and professional. What we gain in independence and freshness we lose in authority and accountability.

In a piece published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Richard Schickel wrote, after registering his horror at the thought that literary blogs might come to replace newspaper book reviews:

Let me put this bluntly, in language even a busy blogger can understand: Criticism—and its humble cousin, reviewing—is not a democratic activity. It is, or should be, an elite enterprise, ideally undertaken by individuals who bring something to the party beyond their hasty, instinctive opinions of a book (or any other cultural object). It is work that requires disciplined taste, historical and theoretical knowledge and a fairly deep sense of the author’s (or filmmaker’s or painter’s) entire body of work, among other qualities.

Schickel’s description of the practice of criticism may or may not be correct—I agree with much of it, but find it difficult to conclude that the authentic responsibilities of conscientious criticism necessarily make it an “elite enterprise”—but the mistake he and these other critics made was in assuming that the particular qualities they discerned at that moment in literary weblogs, and online writing in general, were fixed qualities, that online critical discourse could not continue to develop to the point it could just as easily attract “individuals who bring something to the party beyond their hasty, instinctive opinions of a book” as print. Even at the time, Wasserman conceded that “what counts is the nature and depth and authority” of criticism, “as well as its availability to the widest possible audience. Whether readers find it on the web or the printed page matters not at all. Content rules.”

All along there were litblogs that tried to uphold the critical standards that were supposedly being abandoned (I won't be so presumptuous as to pronounce mine as one of them), but these blogs were generally never mentioned in the surveys of the damage being done by the literary blogosphere that for a while appeared with numbing regularity (or so it seemed). If it was true enough that some litblogs (whose number was increasing quite quickly) offered "criticism" that was not that far removed from *n + l*'s caricature of the typical blogospheric "response"—"I shit on Dante"—there were plenty of others whose authors considered themselves to be contributing to a valuable collective discourse about literature of a kind not previously available to the broader literary public and took seriously the imperative to offer more than off-the-cuff remarks. (And if at the time it would be accurate enough to call many of these bloggers "amateur" critics, very many of them have since, in fact, gone on to establish themselves as respected professional writers and reviewers.)

Something like a validation of the potential for the literary weblog to provide intellectually serious literary criticism was the appearance in 2005 of a blog called *The Valve*. This was a multi-author blog, intended by its founder, John Holbo, to be explicitly "academic" both in the affiliations of its contributors and in the focus of the subjects addressed. I was asked by Holbo to be among its original lineup of contributors, and *The Valve* rather quickly became a very popular site (certainly its number of daily "hits" far exceeded anything I had seen on my blog, or any of my blogger colleagues had seen, for that matter), succeeding in its purpose of attracting academics as both authors and readers and of taking up literary issues in a way that academic critics could find credible. Eventually *The Valve* began presenting blogging "events" in which all of the contributors posted extended commentary on or related to a currently prominent scholarly or critical book. The first of these events considered *Theory's Empire*, which allowed *The Valve*'s slate of contributors to examine the generally anti-theory essays collected in this book, resulting in a lively but also carefully considered series of essays, in sympathy with the book's agenda, strongly critical of it, and somewhere in between. Each of these posts also attracted a large number of comments (some of them as long as the post itself; most of them civil), and altogether this event provided a range and depth of response to and coverage of this book and the scholarly issues it raised that in my view could not have easily been accomplished in print journals.

Over the course of its existence (it officially ceased publishing new posts in 2012), *The Valve* continued to solicit new contributors, but eventually the initial enthusiasm waned, although I would argue that in part this was because the original inspiration for the blog had been fulfilled and the idea of intelligent, informed critical writing appearing on the web no longer seemed such a novel proposition. Something similar happened with the first wave of literary weblogs. Although a few of them still exist (including my own, in an updated iteration), many do not, or at least have been inactive for a long time. But these blogs were in fact remarkably successful, not just in ultimately reaching a wide audience of interested readers but in establishing a space in the cybersphere for the nontrivial discussion of literature, and ultimately in changing the reading habits of many serious readers who previously would never have regarded the internet as a source of legitimate literary debate. I believe it fair to say that the notion one can find entirely respectable web-based critical commentary online is now incontestable and mostly noncontroversial. Someone surfing the web as I did 14 years ago will discover much of interest within a few clicks, although these sites and pages might not be blogs. But this, too, seems to me a sign of their success, not their obsolescence.

Today literary weblogs are more likely to be known simply as “book blogs,” and most of them have indeed settled for something like “book chat” as their mode of operation. More serious-minded blogs do remain, authored by reviewers, critics, and some academics, as well as by poetry and fiction writers using the weblog medium as more than a promotional instrument. Admittedly these blogs have a smaller audience than many literary bloggers had during their period of greatest notoriety, but they may also have a more easily assumed authority and less defensive tone. Nevertheless, the “litblog” is not the object of attention it once was, when it seemed for some to promise liberation from the arbitrary authority of print book reviewers and so-called literary journalists and for others to threaten the already wobbly status of book coverage in the digital era print press.

A significant factor in the relative decline of the litblog is surely the concurrent rise of social media, specifically the development of a substantial literary presence on Twitter and Facebook. The sort of brief commentary and linking with which literary blogging began, and continued to be a prominent feature, has largely been taken over by these social media forums, where a network of “connected” Friends and Followers exchange news and views, albeit often in

an unavoidably offhand way due to the limitations of the medium used. To the extent that a need for “connection” itself is met by sites such as Facebook and Twitter, the same function as served by blogs becomes less urgent, since social media provides it more immediately and ultimately more broadly. Arguably, however, the force of this need was first fully expressed through the success of blogs, which demonstrated that it could be met through digital communication.

In my view, the most important reason why the literary weblog is not now the center of literary discourse online is that in retrospect it also served to illustrate that a serious and sustained level of wired critical discourse was possible, and in the process initiated a transformation of attitude that eventually resulted in its being superseded by other kinds of web-based publication that, while perhaps using the template introduced by weblogs, could not really be called blogs. Multi-author sites such as *The Millions* or *The Rumpus* looked like blogs, but they published something much closer to conventional literary essays, articles, and reviews. In tone these sites were not much removed from typical literary journalism, although the pieces posted there had fewer restrictions on both content and style than traditional print publications. Soon enough, web-specific journals focusing entirely or in part on book reviews such as *The Quarterly Conversation*, *Open Letters Monthly*, and *Full Stop* appeared, as well as other publications that offered print versions but also had significant presence online, such as *Rain Taxi* and *The Brooklyn Rail*. Some intellectually weighty journals such as *3:AM Magazine* and *Jacket* had been around as long as, or longer, than blogs, but they, too, gained greater attention in the litblog’s wake.

The literary criticism in these publications, generally, but not exclusively, reviews, often went far beyond, both in length and in critical heft, what was offered in all but the most studious general interest print publications. Indeed, these book review sites are much more likely to cover experimental and translated works and books from independent presses, which are at best sporadically reviewed in mainstream print book review sections. Few of the reviewers could be called “amateurs” as most of them are experienced reviewers, many with credits as well in the print press, or aspiring reviewers with clear ties to the literary community (themselves writers, writing students, or independent critics). Perhaps it would not be quite accurate to call these critics “professionals,” since much of this work is unfortunately unpaid, but the breadth of reading and the critical sensibility on display signal that the motivation behind the work

transcends the affirmation of status symbolized by monetary remuneration, coming instead from a conviction that contemporary literature deserves genuine critical debate and assessment, which increasingly cannot be fully supplied by newspaper and periodical criticism. (But it would still be nice if these reviewers were paid.)

The appearance of such web-based book review journals as the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Public Books*, and the *National Book Review* has definitively refuted any remaining claims for the inherent superiority of print criticism to criticism originating online. LARB in particular makes it impossible to think that intellectually engaged and critically scrupulous writing needs print on paper for its ideal expression. (This is true not just of LARB—one can find this kind of writing on many of the other sites I have mentioned.) Numerous contributors are in fact academics writing about subjects not always addressed in general interest publications, usually in an accessible prose avoiding the most reflexive kinds of jargon but also the most overt attempts to “popularize.” The same thing is true of *Public Books*, which, however, has not yet attained the prominence of LARB. The *National Review of Books* is closer to the conventional newspaper book review, but it is notable as an implicit acknowledgement of the decline in book coverage in American newspapers in its founding as an online alternative.

A number of the publications I have identified do also offer print versions, although in many cases contents are also available, in part or in their entirety, on the websites. This does not so much indicate a retreat from a commitment to the online medium as it does a recognition that a strict demarcation between the two media has become increasingly untenable, at least as it is supposed to mark some essential difference, about which we must always remain mindful. Sampling both the online and print editions of one of these journals shows there is no such difference, neither in ambition nor in quality of thought. In these publications it becomes clear that writing in print has no intrinsic, metaphysical advantage over writing published through digital means, no greater authority that doesn't come from the centuries-long dominance of the printing press. It should also be said that the convenience and immediacy of online publication does not make it superior to print when convenience and immediacy are not relevant concerns.

I would argue that the primary legacy of the literary blog consists of its questioning of the hegemony not of print but of those critics and reviewers claiming the imprimatur of authority on the basis of little more than their access, however much achieved through perceived merit, to the

limited supply of critical outlets in print. That so many of the first wave of bloggers have subsequently achieved considerable status as writers and critics, online and in print, makes it pretty clear that “merit” was a more widely dispersed phenomenon than some critical “gatekeepers” would have had us believe. The point is not that blogs facilitated the career aspirations of any particular writers or critics but that they fomented a reappraisal of the way we talk about our literary culture that ultimately has reinvigorated non-academic literary criticism. That talk is both livelier and more comprehensive than it was before there was such a thing as a “literary weblog,” and the critics who fretted over their own looming demise still have their part in it.