

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

The Chronicle Review

[Home](#) [Opinion & Ideas](#) [The Chronicle Review](#)

July 2, 2004

The Democratization of Cultural Criticism

By GEORGE COTKIN

Wallace Shawn's play *The Designated Mourner* is in part a lament for the death of serious cultural criticism and intellectual community. Cultural barbarians have vanquished the life of the mind. But the genius of his play is in its refusal to leave unexamined this state of affairs. Not all of what has been lost is to be mourned. The designated mourner gleefully bids adieu to "all that endless posturing, the seriousness, the weightiness" of culture.

Recently, the line of true designated mourners pining for the glory days of criticism has grown longer. After praising the high seriousness and sense of purpose of reviewers during the salad days of the *Partisan Review*, Sven Birkerts, in a recent article in *Bookforum*, finds that the literary world has been wounded by the "seemingly gratuitous negativity" of many reviews. Without a cohesive sense of community, without a set of high ideals, and with sensationalism and publicity paramount, critics such as Dale Peck are all too eager to resort to the bludgeon in their reviews, Birkerts says. Peck's reputation as a literary hatchet man (see his new collection of published essays, *Hatchet Jobs*) was canonized when he opened a *New Republic* review of Rick Moody's *The Black Veil: A Memoir With Digressions* with the line: "Rick Moody is the worst writer of his generation."

If literary criticism is marked by vicious prose and petty bickering, then art criticism exists without firm judgments. The art historian James Elkins remarks in a thoughtful, slim book, *What Happened to Art Criticism?*, that art critics have come to prefer description over assessment. That contrasts with the days when the art critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg were at the ready to wield their judgments and to defend them vociferously. Today, in Elkins's view, there is more art criticism than ever, but it matters less.

The state of cultural criticism today, in the view of many, is debilitated, perhaps even moribund. For Birkerts, Alvin Kiernan, Russell Jacoby, and others, there once existed a lively, deep, public,

and engaged cultural criticism. Great critics -- Lionel Trilling, Philip Rahv, Clement Greenberg, Alfred Kazin, and Dwight Macdonald -- roamed the roadways of criticism, stopping to dispense sage or impassioned judgments and to uphold standards. What happened?

According to this line of thought, our present generation of cultural critics, arriving after the assault of postmodernism and the increasingly widespread commercialization of culture, has been cast adrift, without any firm basis for judgments. Publications and institutions to support serious criticism, in this view, either no longer exist or are few in number.

Critics today, it is also claimed, are too cozy behind the ivied walls of academe, content to employ a prose style that is decipherable only to a handful of the cognoscenti. The deadly dive of university critics into the shallow depths of popular culture, moreover, reveals the unwillingness of these critics to uphold standards. Even if the reasons offered are contradictory, these Jeremiahs huddle around their sad conclusion that serious cultural criticism has fallen into a morass of petty bickering and bloated reputations.

Such narratives of declension, a staple of American intellectual life since the time of the Puritans, are misplaced, self-serving, and historically inaccurate. And difficult to prove. Has the level of criticism declined in the last 50 years? Have we toppled from the urbane and learned heights of Lionel Trilling and Edmund Wilson into the cesspool of literary assassination or mere description? Of course the logic of such an opinion depends on the figures that are being contrasted with one another. Any number of cultural critics thriving today could be invoked to demonstrate that cultural criticism is alive and well.

Consider, for example, a comparison between the sainted Trilling and the ubiquitous Harold Bloom. Birkerts and others praise Trilling for his accessible style, his willingness to place his literary criticism at the "dark and bloody crossroads" where literature and criticism meet. Not only did Trilling revere the university and the ideals of humanism, but he also sought to reach out to the general public, through his activities with "high-brow" book clubs and with his famous anthology of literature, *The Experience of Literature*.

Yet Bloom, who is alive and kicking, has deeply influenced the study of literature in the academy with his ideas about "anxiety of influence." Most recently, in *The Best Poems in the English Language: From Chaucer Through Frost*, he has continued his effort to make serious literature available to a wider public. Lest one respond that Trilling published a novel, well, so has Bloom. Finally,

Trilling's political engagement, over all, was relatively limited and often abstract. Sometimes his single-minded animus to radicalism in the 1940s clouded his political judgments and commitments. Bloom, rather than being a reclusive academic, has entered heartily into the cultural wars, however much one may or may not approve of his opinions.

Is Bloom part of a vanishing breed of public intellectual? In fact, today's media outlets teem with public intellectuals. Consider the case of Henry Louis Gates Jr. Gates not only chairs the prestigious Afro-American-studies department at Harvard University, but he also is an entrepreneur of cultural products without peer, having written an engaging memoir, coedited an interactive CD-ROM encyclopedia, acted as host of a PBS series on Africa, and arranged for publication of the first African-American novel.

John Updike, Elaine Scarry, Stanley Fish, Martha C. Nussbaum, Jay Parini, and Richard Rorty, to name only a few, have done important work within their respective specialties while also branching out to consider other subjects and to scrutinize the culture in general. Thus Updike produces not only novels but art criticism. Indeed some of his novels may be said to function as cultural criticism. Fish manages to retain his standing as a literary critic while also contributing to the analysis of law (as well as writing a regular column about academic culture for *The Chronicle*).

In his article in *Bookforum*, Birkerts mourns the demise of the *Partisan Review*, with its aura of publicly engaged intellectuals and spirited defense of high modernism. The problem with this evaluation is not so much that it is wrong but that it is one-sided. In its most heady days of the late 1940s and early 1950s, *Partisan Review* had barely 15,000 subscribers. Nonetheless its influence was immense, and in the view of the designated mourner that journal, along with *The Saturday Review of Literature*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *Commentary*, from the 1950s until the early 1970s provided an exciting terrain for cultural criticism.

In their pages, Trilling pondered the moral imagination, Dwight Macdonald dissected mass culture, and Norman Podhoretz frankly addressed the racial divide. These critics and journals wielded authority and influence, and a front-page review in *The New York Times Book Review* on Erving Goffman's *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*, could quadruple sales for a serious academic tract. Today *The Saturday Review* and *Partisan Review* are dead, *Commentary* a narrowly conservative shell of its old self.

But many new and thriving venues for criticism and debate exist today, and they are not limited solely to the discussion of literary works. Reason, a libertarian periodical edited by a Ph.D. in English, has a circulation of 60,000 and interrogates cultural issues with a fervor for debate equal to that of the New York intellectuals. The New York Review of Books continues to thrive, joined by The Claremont Review of Books on the right and The Boston Review on the left. "To the Best of Our Knowledge," a syndicated program on National Public Radio, is dedicated to serious discussion of cultural issues. On and on goes the list that attests to the vibrancy of cultural criticism today.

For all of the cultural insight and unity that the Partisan Review crowd produced, they were guilty of a myopia that blinded them to what was new and exciting on the cultural horizon in the 1960s and after. The energy and creativity of the 1960s -- happenings, Pop Art, cinema, and music -- hit the PR intellectuals square on the chin. They never even heard themselves counted out in the arena of cultural relevance. They became disgruntled guardians of high modernism, defending its monuments from the pigeons of the new.

Unfortunately, they became so encrusted with their own certitude and political judgments that they became largely irrelevant. Susan Sontag published her path-breaking essay "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964) -- where she explained how camp functioned as a style -- in the pages of Partisan Review. The journal's editor, William Phillips, however, later admitted that he could not figure out what it was about and that if he had understood its openness to transgression, then he would not have approved. Sontag offered the New York community a useful link between the older literary culture and the emerging culture of cinema and theater. But the Partisan Review crowd did little to cultivate her and the emerging generation of critics.

Today the complaint is that literary culture lacks civility. We live in an age of commercialism and spectacle. Writers seek the limelight, and one way to bask in it is to publish reviews that scorch the landscape, with Dale Peck as the famous, but not atypical, case in point. Heidi Julavits, in an essay in *The Believer*, lamented the downfall of serious fiction and reviewing. She surveyed a literary culture that had embraced "snark," her term for hostile, self-serving reviews.

The snark review, according to Julavits, eschews a serious engagement with literature in favor of a sound-bite approach, an attempt to turn the review into a form of entertainment akin to film

reviews or restaurant critiques. Birkerts found cultural criticism to be in "critical condition." For him, the postmodern turn to theory, its questioning of objectivity, cut the critical, independent ground out from under reviewers. The rise of chain bookstores and blockbuster best sellers demeaned literary culture, making it prey to the commercial values of the market and entertainment. For both Julavits and Birkerts, the last great era of literary culture was the late 1940s and 1950s, the heady days of the New York intellectuals and *Partisan Review*.

In its heyday, the writers of the *Partisan Review* were a proudly prickly crowd. Mary McCarthy, in Norman Podhoretz's estimation, was "the dark lady" of criticism. As a woman in a man's world blessed with a biting satirical sense, McCarthy out-venomed many of her compatriots. Thus, Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, for McCarthy, "reeks of literary ambition as the apartment reeks of cheap perfume; it is impossible to witness one of Mr. Williams's plays without being aware of the pervading smell of careerism."

The line from McCarthy to Peck does not seem discontinuous. Nor should we forget that civility rarely reigned in the circles of New York intellectuals. The art critic Clement Greenberg physically pummeled the theater critic Lionel Abel after Abel rejected the view that Jean Wahl, the French philosopher, was anti-Semitic. Though Peck has the reputation of a literary hatchet man, so far as I know his blows thus far have all been confined to the printed page.

The charge of careerism leveled by McCarthy against Williams is a common weapon today in the hands of the Jeremiahs of cultural criticism. It is one way of bemoaning the specialization of academic culture, of the willingness of young critics to go for the jugular when a feint might be a more proper response.

But before we simply dismiss this bloodletting as part and parcel of an emerging Jerry Springer show of criticism, it might be useful to recall the petty squabbles that drew the circle around the *Partisan Review* crowd, such as the thunderstorm of controversy that Norman Podhoretz's *Making It* and Norman Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* evoked years ago. Both works were condemned for announcing that the intellectual world was not immune from careerism, from the desire for success.

There are excesses aplenty today. Do we really need to know about the New Yorker critic David Denby's fling with pornography, as he notes in his confession, *American Sucker*? Does *Nation* critic Katha Pollitt need to confess about "Googling" her ex-lover, following his

every move? In criticism, no less than in life, sometimes less is more.

Cultural criticism has certainly changed over the years. The old days of the critic who wielded unchallenged authority have happily passed. Ours is a more pluralistic age, one not beholden to a narrow literary culture. Today cultural criticism is alive and well, populated at the top by giants such as Harold Bloom, Susan Sontag, Richard Rodriguez, Morris Dickstein, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Frederic Jameson: all critics with differing perspectives and concerns. And cultural criticism, more than ever, is percolating up from below. Blogs and Amazon reviews are opening up the cultural space of criticism, offering new possibilities. The literature professor Michael Bérubé offers valuable cultural and political analysis on his blog to about 40,000 visitors a month. Terry Teachout, drama critic for The Wall Street Journal and music critic for Commentary, has a blog, "About Last Night," in which he daily elucidates the thinking process and concerns of the engaged critic of culture.

The democratization of criticism -- as in the Amazon system of readers' evaluating books -- is a messy affair, as democracy must be. But the solution to the problems of criticism in the present are best not discovered in the musty basements of nostalgia and sentiment for the cultural criticism of a half-century gone. Rather the solution is to recognize, as John Dewey did almost a century ago, that the problems of democracy demand more democracy (against the corporatization of culture), less nostalgia for a golden age that never was, and a spirit of openness to what is new and invigorating in our culture.

George Cotkin, a professor of history at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo, is author of *Existential America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). He is writing a history of postwar cultural criticism for Columbia University Press.

<http://chronicle.com> Section: The Chronicle Review Volume 50, Issue 43, Page B8

Copyright 2011. All rights reserved.

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037