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L. C. Knights and Donald Culver

Excerpt

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SCRUTINY

A Quarterly Review

Edited by

L. C. KNIGHTS and DONALD CULVER.

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THE first number of a review is not, of course, an ideal place in which to discuss the best Method of Conducting a Critical Journal. To do so provides openings for irony, and caution would suggest that we creep into print meekly. But such a course is impossible; the age is illiterate with periodicals and no ordinary reasons will excuse an addition to the swarm. Policy, as well as honesty, demands that if we imagine ourselves to have a valid reason for existence, we should state it.

The general dissolution of standards is a commonplace. Many profess to believe (though fewer seem to care) that the end of Western civilization is in sight. But perhaps even the Spenglerian formula, in its deterministic nonchalance, represents an emotional as much as an intellectual reaction; and if optimism is naïve, fatalism is not necessarily an intelligent attitude. Intelligence has an active function.

Those who are aware of the situation will be concerned to cultivate awareness, and will be actively concerned for standards. A review is necessary that combines criticism of literature with criticism of extra-literary activities. We take it as axiomatic that concern for standards of living implies concern for standards in the arts.

At this point we remind ourselves of the recent history of critical journalism. In England during the last two decades no serious critical journal has been able to survive in the form in which it was conceived; and how many have been able to survive in any form? *The Calendar of Letters*, which deserved the whole-hearted support of the educated, lasted less than three years. And more recently the *Nation*, itself the grave of the *Athenæum*, has suffered a euphemistic extinction. There are survivors, but they have for the most part steadily lowered their level of appeal. There is no need to describe the more blatant signs—gossiping essays, inferior criticism, competitions and crossword puzzles. In America there is the *Hound and Horn*, *The Symposium*, and the *New*

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Republic, all of which remind us that America is not inhabited solely by Babbitts. The *New Republic* in particular combines literary criticism with sensitive attention to modern affairs. But these papers have no English counterparts, and the ordinary man receives far less help from the better-class journals and the critics than, in a civilized community, he has a right to expect.¹

* * *

The reader will have gathered by now that *Scrutiny* is not to be a purely literary review. But what exactly, he may wonder, is meant by that hint of a generous interest in 'modern affairs' at large? There are politics, for instance. Well, a devotion to them at the party level, is, no doubt, somewhere necessary. But something else is necessary—and prior: a play of the free intelligence upon the underlying issues. This is to desiderate a cultivated historical sense, a familiarity with the 'anthropological' approach to contemporary civilization exemplified by *Middletown*, and a catholic apprehension of the humane values. When we say that the political ambition of *Scrutiny* is indicated here, we incur criticism from two sides: to the effect that our ambition is amusing, and that we are too remote from practice to interest anyone really alive to the plight of the world. As for the former criticism, a glance round at current journalism suggests that at any rate to be too ambitious will be something of a novel fault. As for the latter, the impotence of the practical mind to do anything essential in practice is being so thoroughly demonstrated that the retort needs no pressing.

Scrutiny, then, will be seriously preoccupied with the movement of modern civilization. And if we add that it will direct itself especially upon educational matters the reader will realize

¹There is of course *The Criterion*, of which it is difficult to speak without respect. It is still the most serious as it is the most intelligent of our journals. But its high price, a certain tendency to substitute solemnity for seriousness, and, during the last two years, a narrowing of its interests, prevent it from influencing more than a small proportion of the reading public. It is necessary, but not the *unum necessarium*.

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that there may, after all, be a fairly close approach to practice.

* * *

Where literary criticism is concerned we can be immediately practical and political. The first duty is to publish good criticism judiciously directed. And inseparable from this is a conscious critical policy, if anything is to be effected in the present state of culture. For to-day there are anti-highbrow publics and 'modernist' publics, but there is no public of Common Readers with whom the critic can rejoice to concur. He cannot leave his standards to look after themselves. When Mr. Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* appeared it received one intelligent review, in an American paper.¹ Mr. Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* apparently caused nothing but bewilderment in the minds of nearly all its reviewers. On the other hand *Jew Süss* received a noisy welcome in the Press ('Everybody who respects himself has read it' said Mr. Arnold Bennett); and *Dusty Answer* was said to 'reveal new possibilities for literature.' There is no need to multiply examples. They can be found in almost any number of the *Times Literary Supplement* (where at one time it was possible to find criticism), in the columns of the Sunday papers and elsewhere.

And when criticism defaults the loss is not merely the reader's. Of late years important works of art have appeared, serious books of criticism have been written, but their reception has been such as to discourage further production on the part of their creators, if not to make creation impossible; for in spite of the romantic conception of the poet as a bird (preferably a skylark) singing to please himself in glorious isolation, the artist does depend in large measure on the prevailing standard of taste. On occasions he may be able to ignore his age and its demands, but in the past the relation between artist and patron (the person or persons for whom he writes, builds, carves, etc.) has been of great importance in determining the use of talent. There is no reason to suppose that it will be otherwise in the future.

* * *

It goes without saying that for the majority neither the present

¹By Allen Tate in the *Hound and Horn*.

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drift of civilization nor the plight of the arts is a matter for much concern. It is true there are many who are interested in one or the other without seeing any connexion between them; but it is only a small minority for whom the arts are something more than a luxury product, who believe, in fact, that they are 'the storehouse of recorded values' and, in consequence, that there is a necessary relationship between the quality of the individual's response to art and his general fitness for a humane existence. The trouble is not that such persons form a minority, but that they are scattered and unorganised. Every year, for instance, intelligent young men and women go down from the Universities and are swallowed by secondary and public schools. Their interests wilt in the atmosphere of the school common room, and isolation makes their efforts to keep themselves informed of 'the best that is known and thought in the world' unnecessarily depressing and difficult. Others besides schoolmasters are in the same position. *Scrutiny* has been founded on the assumption that a magazine in which such men and women can exchange and refine their ideas, and which provides a focus of intellectual interests, will perform a service attempted by no other paper.

* * *

It would perhaps be wisest not to define the programme of *Scrutiny* too narrowly until intentions can be judged by performance. But if the case which we have outlined above is to be something more than a gesture of dissatisfaction, it is necessary that we should at least indicate the policy which we intend to follow.

Scrutiny will print critical articles on literature and the arts and on various significant aspects of contemporary life. In both these departments of criticism, analysis and interpretation will be with a view to judgment—from a standpoint which will have been made clear when one or two numbers have been published.

Besides essays in literary criticism, a few carefully selected books will be reviewed each quarter, of the sort that is so frequently passed over by the newspaper supplements and the monthly magazines, or inadequately treated. Occasionally there will be reviews of books which have appeared in the past and which have suffered an unjust disregard; and it may seem profitable to analyse certain popular successes. In each case consistent standards of criticism will be applied.

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A pervasive interest of the magazine will find expression in disinterested surveys of some departments of modern life in an attempt to increase understanding of the way in which civilization is developing. In the collection of material it is hoped to secure the co-operation of readers who are in a favourable position for observation.

Related to this kind of analysis are the articles which we have planned on various aspects of education—the teaching of English in schools and universities, the training of teachers, and similar subjects. Traditional methods of education are being subjected at present to fairly rigorous criticism and a certain amount of overhauling; criticism which sees educational problems as part of the larger problem of general culture is, however, still necessary. To say that the life of a country is determined by its educational ideals is a commonplace; but it is a commonplace that is passively accepted more often than it is acted upon.

Scrutiny will also publish original compositions. Since, however, more people are able to write good criticism than good verse or short stories, we commit ourselves to no large or constant proportion of creative work.

In conclusion, we wish to make it clear that active co-operation from readers is invited. All contributions will be carefully considered, in order to make current the best of that kind of criticism which is now so often confined to isolated groups and private discussion. We have long been told that *les clerics* have betrayed their function. It would be more true to say that their voice cannot be heard above the confused noises made by the self-appointed sponsors of civilization. We do not know how long this will be so. Meanwhile the attempt is worth making to provide a focus of ideas and a centre of resistance for those who accept the case presented in this manifesto.

* * *

We have a critical policy. This does not mean that all articles printed in *Scrutiny* will be identical in outlook. In particular, the points of view of articles with immediate practical bearings may differ considerably from each other, and they will not necessarily coincide with editorial opinion. For instance, the reader need not draw from the essay on Public Schools any conclusions regarding our own attitude to them. We shall publish articles which—whether

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we agree with them entirely or not—are of intrinsic importance, which help to clear up current confusions and suggest a new approach to standards.

* * *

In the choice of paper, type and general format the editors have attempted to combine a minimum of expense with a maximum of reading matter. It remains for those who think that a review such as this is worth their support to guarantee their subscriptions to the editors, and (in place of the usual advertising, which we cannot afford) to make it known to others who may be interested.

A subscription form will be found inside the back cover.

No payment is made for contributions.

All communications should be addressed to: The Editors,
13, Leys Road, Cambridge, England.

A NOTE ON NOSTALGIA

ALL one can gather from the present day use of the word 'nostalgia' in criticism is that it confers on the user a kind of aloof superiority. 'Somewhat nostalgic,' says J. B. Trend of an article he reviewed in *The Criterion* last January, and a few pages further on another critic brings the same charge against Middleton Murry. E. Miller, the psycho-pathologist, makes a most sweeping generalisation on the relation between nostalgia and some forms of art: 'In so far as poetry in its lyrical manifestation is the nostalgic cry of the mind expressing its attitude towards nature, experience, and the inner self, it is *par excellence* the voice of the schizothymic temperament. . . This nostalgic background of all lyric art. . . ' [*Types of Mind and Body*, p. 100]. The word invariably conveys the same tone of slightly pitying disparagement, but what it implies beyond this vague attitude of the critic is seldom clear. Generally, of course, it is no more than a conveniently non-committal derogatory label. But even when the theme is developed a little no very precise meaning appears, although the potency of the word becomes impressive. Waldo Frank shows what can be done with it: 'The nostalgia of T. S. Eliot and Berlin (Irving Berlin, the songwriter) is feeble; it is the refrain, dissolved in our world of early nineteenth-century romantics (Musset and Nerval—Schubert and Robert Franz)' [*The Re-discovery of America*, p. 131.] With nostalgia neither defined nor evaluated, utterances like this remain safely beyond the range of discussion.

Simple homesickness appears to be typically an aspect of social life. True, the 'home' one yearns for comprises the whole familiar framework—objects and institutions as well as people—within which one lives and in dealing with which one possesses established habits and sentiments. (It was inevitable that Proust should record the experience: *Place Names* the second section of *Within a Budding Grove* has this for one of its explicit themes). Nevertheless, out of the whole framework, people are missed most.

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And it seems probable that the comfort of familiar furniture and routine is only a substitute for, or a suggestion of, the sense of security given by membership of an adequate social group. It may be that a 'herd instinct' has to be assumed to explain the fact that social life gives this satisfaction, but the assumption is questionable. All that seems indisputable is the obvious fact: that we do put high value upon the sharing and sanctioning by others of our interests, attitudes, and sentiments.

But the notion of 'others' and the group in this sense needs to be examined. Being bound to other people by having any interest in common with them constitutes group membership of a sort. An explorer living with a primitive tribe and sharing their interest in food-seeking, means of shelter and what-not, is in some degree a member of the group. Nevertheless he is much more a member of his civilized group at home, for that group shares not only his primitive impulses but some at least of his more highly developed ways of behaving and feeling. To be fully adequate a group must not only offer fellowship in the everyday concern for simple comfort, physical and emotional; it must also be able to appraise the finer achievement of its members. Not that a genius must surround himself with equals before he can feel comfortable; simply that he and his group should recognise that his most advanced work is at least rooted in socially sanctioned evaluations. Loyalty to the group and satisfaction from it must both be incomplete for people whose deepest concerns appear to be unrelated to those of the group. And in everyday life the fundamental need for social backing is obscured by the necessity for constantly ignoring the standards of the group with which one happens to dwell, but of which one is not wholeheartedly a member. It is the frustrated desire for an adequate group that lies behind typically nostalgic writing.

Synge's *Aran Islands* illustrates the point admirably. Synge periodically fled from 'civilization' to the primitive Aran islanders, seeing in their manners something more congenial to his own attitudes. Certainly they jarred on him less than did civilized people, but naturally they could give him no positive fellowship in his complex interests. He would have liked to think that their manner of living was the everyday manifestation of a rather highly developed culture, of what he calls 'the real spirit of the island.'

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'Yet it is only in the intonation of a few sentences or some old fragment of melody that I catch the real spirit of the island, for in general the men sit together and talk with endless iteration of the tides and fish, and the price of kelp in Connemara.' He had abandoned one inadequate group for another, and he could find full fellowship in neither. His indictment of the civilized group after his return to the mainland is bitterly nostalgic. 'I have come out of an hotel full of tourists and commercial travellers, to stroll along the edge of Galway Bay, and look out in the direction of the islands. The sort of yearning I feel towards those lonely rocks is indescribably acute. This town that is usually so full of wild human interest, seems in my present mood a tawdry medley of all that is crudest in modern life. The nullity of the rich and the squalor of the poor give me the same pang of wondering disgust; yet the islands are fading already and I can hardly realise that the smell of the seaweed and the drone of the Atlantic are still moving round them.' His relief on taking flight is pathetic: 'It gave me a moment of exquisite satisfaction to find myself moving away from civilization in this crude canvas canoe that has served primitive races since man first went on the sea.' And his slight puzzled disappointment after sojourning with the primitive group points clearly to the social implication of his recurrent nostalgia: 'In some ways these men and women seem strangely far away from me. They have the same emotions that I have, and the animals have; yet I cannot talk to them when there is much to say, more than to the dog that whines beside me in a mountain fog. There is hardly an hour I am with them that I do not feel the shock of some inconceivable idea, and then again the shock of some vague emotion that is familiar to them and to me. On some days I feel this island as a perfect home and resting place; on other days I feel that I am a waif among the people. I can feel more with them than they can with me, and while I wander among them they like me sometimes, and laugh at me sometimes, yet never know what I am doing.'

Thomas Mann confirms the view that nostalgia is one outcome of incomplete membership of any social group when he describes lifelong nostalgia as the lot of Tonio Kröger, 'a *bourgeois* who strayed off into art, a bohemian who feels nostalgic yearnings for respectability, an artist with a bad conscience.'