

THE ALTERNATIVE February, 1972

The Function of Criticism at the Present Time

Roger Rosenblatt

WHEN I WAS a college senior debating whether to apply to law school or graduate school in English, my prospective father-in-law advised law school, and so I applied to graduate school. The first place that accepted me was Michigan, and when I told my prospective father-in-law he said that's fine, but it isn't the East. Next I was accepted by NYU. He said that's all right, but it's not the Ivy League. When Columbia came through, he told me that it wasn't Harvard, Princeton, or Yale. When I got into Princeton, he said it wasn't Harvard or Yale. When I got into Yale, he said it wasn't Harvard. When I got into Harvard, he said it wasn't law school.

Things trouble me at a later stage than they do most people. I seem to catch on to the fact that a problem exists in a certain area at just about the time its solution is imminent. Luckily, my zeal at these discoveries is so wholehearted that people mistake it for a long-running, passionate commitment which has recently peaked, and therefore congratulate me on my stamina. It took me three years in graduate school to wonder what I was doing there. Between teaching assignments, taking exams, learning three languages, writing a dissertation, taking out the garbage, losing my jump shot, noticing that my wife had given up teaching to raise two children, apparently ours, discovering an inability to stay awake past midnight, acquiring charge accounts, electrical appliances, and a few other things which signaled my future death, I gradually began to consider towards what profession my graduate student friends and I were supposed to be heading. (Most of these friends had actually considered this problem two years earlier, and are now in legal practice, earning a bundle.) One thing was certain; I had no skills. This, in the eventuality of universal draft, seemed an advantage.

As long as I kept to my own constituency, this matter of what I was doing never came to a head. All of us graduate students were in the same boat (no one wanted to make waves), and at parties — there were many, all of them desperate — we behaved like characters in Thomas Mann's short stories, unconsciously decking out our own burial ships (we English teachers can go on like this forever), without

even the tacit admission that we were all at sea. The only hope we had to go on was the fact that our mentors, the professors whom we were to become, were alive and seemed content. It was reasonable to conclude that if we behaved ourselves, we too would grow up to be alive and content, yet our elders never said exactly why they were content or what they were doing with their lives. Even had I been brave enough to put the question directly, no purpose would have been served. In university circles, the question, "what are we doing here?" is the signal to break up the party.

Modern times have not really affected this silence because we teachers are too busy reforming the curriculum to explore the existing profession. The good in this is that it preserves one area within the university where there is no danger of fist fights. On the outside, however, it is a different story, as it always is, because no matter how naturally adept or practiced you are in social evasion, there must always come a moment, after the soup, a gap in the lunch time hilarity or in the shared melancholy over world crises, when your (businessman, cop, doctor, architect, pimp, engineer, commercial artist, forest ranger) friend will look straight into your shifty eyes from the steady security of his own, and ask what it is precisely that you do. I usually try to get around this rudeness first by simply naming the courses I teach, skillfully tossing in literary jargon (anagoge, Skeltonics) in hopes that my accuser will not wish to appear ignorant before me and drop the subject. This rarely works, as the presence of a college professor like no other stimulus on earth seems always to encourage confidence in even the shakiest people. I will then try merely stating the classes I teach, again being careful to indicate that I guide graduate students and honors candidates as well as the regular run, implying by so doing that my work is really too advanced for lay comprehension. Failing these two ploys, I tell the truth, always an error. I gulp and simply say that my job is to read books and talk and write about them, to determine and demonstrate what these books mean, where they fit into the history of facts and ideas, and why or why not they are worth reading. After

I make this declaration there is an excited pause while my companion searches my expression for a sign that I'm kidding.

I won't say that there isn't some compensation for leading this mystery life, because there is. First of all, it's a great advantage with women, or so I'm told through hearsay by distant acquaintances in foreign universities. Of course, there are those who, when you tell them your work, split your sides and theirs by exclaiming, "Well, I'd better watch my grammar," but for every one of these there are five others who glow all over at the mere mention of literature, and who wriggle furiously at the drop of "poetry." Throw in Modern or Romantic, and watch out. To these women it makes not the slightest difference that they don't know what it is you do. Whatever it is, you've got to be very sensitive to do it. There is no doubt that the academic attachment to poets is the next best thing to being there. I tell women I teach Robert Browning, and immediately they begin talking in sonnets.

With men, however, you can barely strike up a conversation if they know what it is you do. Once you get past the "Well, I'd better watch my grammar" line, a special and eerie quiet comes over the scene, one in which the stranger is occupied in guessing whether you're a fairy, and you in retaliation are trying to strike poses which would indicate that you're not. It never fails that if I am cloistered with a businessman to whom I've just revealed my profession, my next move inevitably is to mention something about sports, especially football. If it would help matters I would probably tell a traveling salesman joke and wear chaps, but it wouldn't. Even by the time I've proven I'm straight I've talked so much sports that I sound like a one-track jock.

Occasionally you meet someone who has either majored in English himself (but who since law school has seen his error and now would take his conversion out on you), or whose child who majored in English is now selling lanyards in Majorca. These people are unusual in that although they do not know what you do, they do not like it and seek a fight. In the long run their hostility is easier to deal with than the bafflement of the general, because

you can always pit your sense of beauty against their crass materialism. Of course, beauty will beat materialism every time, the equalizing factor being that it envies what it conquers, but for the moment of the struggle you have the advantage of their not understanding the function of literary criticism, your knowledge that this lack of understanding is ubiquitous, and your consequent disregard for a hundred forensic devices with which a seasoned debator would string you up. You therefore conduct the contest on the ethereal plan which is the English teacher's native ground, using the universal ignorance of your function the way a cuttlefish uses his own smoke (a mixed metaphor, though pretty).

In balance, however, the fact that almost no one knows what I do for a living must be considered a handicap. Working in a university one has certain general privileges associated with teaching such as the freedom to meander on Madison Avenue in the middle of the day in the middle of the week, but except for observing obsequious acts of deference performed by publishers' text book representatives who seek your editorship of selected essays by animals, there is no particular external advantage to the teaching of English, and more than a fair share of particular drawbacks. Unlike our colleagues in more flashy disciplines we are not invited to serve in government, primarily I suppose because, excluding JFK, no recent U.S. President seems to have needed English. And except for the unearthing of the Sutton Hoo burial-ship (these things keep coming up) in 1939 and the identification of a new Shakespearean source and a Joyce manuscript a couple years ago, there aren't many news events on which English scholars are asked to comment. I would like to say that our insularity has sharpened our wits, but this essay speaks for itself. The fact is that although we know what evil lurks in the hearts of men, we have clouded men's minds so that they cannot see us (an allusion).

The most painful situation where the employment question develops is with students themselves, a situation more delicate and potentially embarrassing than dealing with one's contemporaries, and one which illustrates the wisdom of teachers avoiding students whenever possible. At Harvard this situation occurs around the middle of the freshman year, when in effort to decide on their areas of concentration, students will seek out faculty members of the various departments and ask them to advertise their trades. It is a small consolation to recognize that ninety-nine per cent of the students are insincere in this quest, wanting either to start working up an elaborate network of self-exonerations (when later, in retrospect, they decide they've chosen the wrong major), or simply to kill time (yours) or, in the case of my colleagues, to meet a famous

man. Most Harvard men and women usually know in what they wish to specialize from birth. At the age of eighteen what they want to learn from you is are they going to be happy, to which I always answer yes, one fraud to another.

It's the one sincere per cent, as usual, who cause all the trouble — not the little orphans Annie combing English for relevance (for these I have a prepared speech packed with quotations from Hooker and Sidney which, by the time it has mounted to its boring peroration, has left the kid's heart set on Social Relations) — but the others, the ones who genuinely wish to discover if the study of literature would be a decent way to spend three and a half years of schooling. Once these people are in the program, they pose no problem. Like insects to fire, they become what they sought to investigate. But at the start of things, when these trouble makers honestly want to know why English, that's when

Great American Series

"If you don't say anything, you won't be called on to repeat it."

Calvin Coolidge

I begin to wish I were in economics. In those instances, instead of reciting the law, I would much prefer to read the students "To His Coy Mistress," "The Vanity of Human Wishes," the ode "To Autumn," "Lucifer in Starlight," something of Addison and Johnson, of *Paradise Lost*, a Shakespearean soliloquy, a paragraph from Jane Austen, one from Hardy, one from Conrad, passages out of Arnold, Melville, Thoreau, lines from *Troilus and Criseyde*, the Thomas villanelle, short stories of Hawthorne, Twain, O'Connor, etc. etc., deep into the night, only to look up afterwards, though maybe by now tearful or flushed, faces I greeted at the opening of the interview. Therefore I do state the law, hoping that somewhere in my recitation they catch the fact that I enjoy my work, and are attracted at least by that.

For these students and their heirs, for my lunch time companion and his, for my father-in-law and his Wall Street cronies, for my own father, an internist who has politely wondered these past years why I too am called doctor, but primarily for Mr. and Mrs. English Graduate Student and all the ships at sea, I have decided to decide publicly what it is I do. I know this is a risk, that at the end I may discover that what I do is nothing, but if only for the sake of the children, I have to face this thing. Naturally, if I should find out that what I do is nothing, I will scrap this piece, not because it is better to thrive in ignorance,

but because other English teachers would do me violence. (If at this point you pure and social scientists are beginning to feel comfortable, let me remind you that English, whatever it is, commands the attention and loyalty of more undergraduates in this nation than any other discipline, and if English departments go, colleges go, and so go you, government grants and all.) Indeed, with tens of thousands of students majoring in English, with dozens of university presses publishing hundreds of new critical works each year, with the current Ph. D. market overrun with would-be teachers of English, with a seemingly endless number of quarterly publications made up of literary notes and questions and answers, with many of these same publications and certain societies as well devoted expressly to the celebrations or anatomy of particular authors, with these and the plain fact that in every high school and college curriculum the single absolute and indispensable requirement for an educated individual is the study of English, we must be doing something, right? Right!

(Don't panic.) I start with a working definition a little narrower than the general designation of literature as written work of enduring importance. For the teacher of English who deals directly or indirectly with people, literature too must deal with people, and it must be good. Literature, then, is the beautiful and orderly expression of human activity in written words. It deals with people, and it does something good. In the highest uses of language it shows our common heroism, cruelty, capacity for gentleness and stupidity, our resilience, friability, magnanimity, selfishness, our blunderings and grace. In short, among the arts it is the most comprehensive expression of our humanity. Accordingly, literary criticism is the instrument by which such expression may be made clear or clearer (clarity not being necessary to beauty or order), made known or more widely known. What beauty may mean I leave to the proving power of the individual critic. The larger point is that literature does something good, and that literary criticism also does something good, though it is not the same good.

The operation of literary criticism is divided into five parts. (It is always a good idea to number one's items in an essay, even if, as in this case, the writer is not certain that he has enough distinctions to fill his quota. Had Poe used numbers in "The Philosophy of Composition" no one ever would have noticed that there are no ideas in the piece, and if it weren't for Empson telling you that there are seven types of ambiguity, you'd swear that each was worth one seventh. I've also always suspected that there are fewer than thirteen ways of looking at a black bird, more than ten commandments, and that there are actually three *Quartets*, but judge for

yourself.) The number five is a memorable number, and therefore there are five operations in literary criticism. They are as follows: 1) the expansion of literature, 2) the revealing of patterns, 3) the recognition and admiration of excellence, 4) the demonstration of precision, 5) the recognition of the distinction between literature and life.

Of the five the first is the easiest, although it can appear the most remarkable. All that it takes to open up a literary work is study — in the case of *Finnegan's Wake* about ten years which prove not to be worth it, in the case of Joyce's "Clay," about ten hours which make the difference between a dim apprehension of personal sadness and the clear vision of a whole dead world. The expansion of the story, "Clay" depends on a familiarity with the map of Dublin around 1910, some facts about the city laundries, the rules of one Halloween game, and the words and tune of Balfe's song, "I Dreamt that I Dwealt" — nothing more. Add to these one's own sense of the mixture of pitiable and irritating qualities in certain old people, and the story fans out completely. The expansion of literature is detective work at its best. It encourages appreciation of compression and selectivity, for the art of being able to see human activity in terms of little things like symbols and images, but best of all, it urges the mind to assault the seemingly invulnerable, to shake up and poke around until one begins to see things sharply and with a cool intelligence.

The revealing of patterns takes a wider range of study than the expansion operation, but it's a similar process of placing a literary work into one or another perspective, and enjoying it the more for that placement. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the patterns one ought to know are the patterns of the black migration north in the United States, the patterns of black education and of black Christianity, as well as the more universal patterns of sexual guilt and the relationship between fathers and sons. These patterns are historical, cultural, spiritual and psychological in nature, and it takes an understanding of all of them to know what Baldwin is talking about. There are personal patterns worth knowing too, ones which indicate where a work or a line fits into a writer's own scheme of thought, and there are patterns of convention, form, theme and myth — to get into Robert Grave's *Ulysses*, look at Homer's, Dante's, Shakespeare's, Daniel's and Tennyson's. Sometimes the most important part about revealing patterns is to discover the discrepancies, the places where a man changes his mind and the pattern in which he functions changes shape. In that is a version of the whole struggle between human invention and restriction, not always a pleasant business to watch, but our own.

I come to the recognition and



"(Summit conferences are) not diplomacy or negotiation at all. They are propaganda tournaments in which the protagonists are aiming not at those with whom they talk, but at their rivals' public opinion. This is well understood by the totalitarians, but only partly by democratic politicians, and not at all by the democratic public."

Charles de Gaulle

admiration of excellence, an elitist notion if there ever was one, and one bound to exasperate those who prize the Scott and Helen Nearing crowings from the wilderness over *Walden*. No exertion of energy is likely to dissuade such readers because, like the *New York Times*, they confuse contemporaneousness with life (unlike *Life* which confuses contemporaneousness with the *New York Times*), but the effort is still a central operation of literary criticism. This is not to suggest that a critic ought to stop using the word "perhaps" and to cease apologizing for his own existence because these are our tools of the trade, but after or under all the gestures of self-depreciation the cold truth is that the product of an enormous amount of reading, of a thousand comparisons of the ways in which feelings and ideas are expressed, is taste, and to mean something taste must be passed on, even if it may be regarded as an imposition. If it is so regarded, the trick is to make the student prove that it is an imposition, and should he do so effectively, the worse for you, but the better for criticism. The achievement of a sense of discrimination is more painful in literature than in one's social life because it takes time, but in the long run it saves time,

which cannot be said of any social decision.

The demonstration of precision in literature could justifiably be incorporated under the recognition of excellence, but to do so would obscure its independent value, to say nothing of reducing the number five. If you remember, I am talking about the function of criticism at the present time, and there is no time like the heavy, drag, and out o' sight present to demonstrate precision of language. (This, by the way, is not a swipe at slang, as every age has its slang, language managing to flourish with or in spite of it. What scares me about our own age is the apparently willful desire for inarticulation, which can only be an off-shoot of the desire to avoid discriminations in a larger striving, I suppose, for the equality of man in deaf muteness.) In Eliot's "Sweeney Erect," Sweeney wipes "suds" around his face as he prepares to shave. Why suds instead of shaving cream? Because shaving cream would break the rhythm of the line, and it adds nothing to it. Why suds instead of cream? Because with cream the action may be misunderstood. Why suds instead of soap? Because soap suggests cleanliness and conveys a less vivid picture. Why suds instead of foam? Because Sweeney is a comic character as well as

lecherous. Why suds? Because Sweeney is comic and lecherous and grotesque and potent, and because the sound is right. The difference, said Twain, between the word and the right word is the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

The fifth operation, the recognition of the distinction between literature and life, applies to a potential pitfall of all the arts, but particularly to literature because literature is the most explicit. Because it is the most explicit, even those people who appreciate the meaning of a literary work, recognize its patterns, its general excellence and manipulation of language, can and do make the mistake of comparing literary activity, especially the activity of fictional characters, to their own. The practical purpose in pointing this out as a mistake is the deflation of their self-esteem, as no one ever compares himself to a mean or low character — all those fathers moaning about serpents' teeth — but the greater usefulness in the recognition of the distinction between literature and life is that it provides a reminder of one's own wonderful and terrible human sloppiness. Literature is the beautiful and orderly expression of human activity in written words, but most of the time real human activity is neither beautiful nor orderly, and to see this is not merely to see that one's children are more grateful than Lear's, but, in a wider view, to see the importance of endurance as a virtue, and to appreciate that in real life it is our dogged perseverance along which carries our familial tragedies and comedies beyond the final act. Literature orders life, and life goes on. To recognize this is to think the more of both.

It is inevitable, and I know that all of you who are still awake have already perceived this, that the five kinds of operations described above easily become forms of advocacy. I said before that literary criticism does something good. To disclose the secrets of a work of literature is to see something clearly for its various components; to know its patterns is to see something steady and whole; to recognize its worth is to make informed evaluations; to appreciate its precision is to appreciate the act of saying what one means; to understand that what you're reading is not what you're living precludes your corruption of either. Done right, literary criticism teaches these things, and the learning of them in turn reminds some people at least that such revelations and processes are not inborn, but must be continually coaxed from us, restated and rehearsed, lest we once again convince ourselves of our latent divinity. The function of criticism at the present time — are you ready? — is the advocacy of common sense. If that isn't doing something good, I'll go to law school.

Nietzsche hated academics, and being one himself he had a right to.

I confess enormous pleasure in being able to cite Nietzsche, not because he was so deep a thinker, but because of his great name. There are few pleasures in criticism equal to the dropping of exotic names. Poe (king of an exotic name itself) advised writers for *Blackwood* magazine to toss in a line of Greek whenever possible for sheer effect, and admittedly there is a certain shimmer about any page of prose that frames such a line, even if the translation turns out to be "I see the blue duck," but nowadays that particular pretense is exposed, not thanks to Poe, but to the hoards of pretenders themselves who overdid a good thing. Names, however, still have an immense impressive power, so immense in fact that one day a man's entire intellectual or artistic value may be determined solely by the spelling of his name, a phenomenon already being born in the celebrations of Levi-Strauss and Sontag. These two are fine names and should be cited very often, though not as often as Kafka, Goethe, Hegel, Schlegel, Jung or Nietzsche. I also like Proust, Camus, Sartre and Gorki, but not as much as the Germans, the very letters of whose names send readers hurtling against doors. Critics should be very grateful that essays didn't begin and end with Johnson and Burke. One well-placed Kierkegaard is worth a hundred Johnsons, comparative intelligence notwithstanding.

Nietzsche hated academics for their lack of "nobility," for the fact that they do not "dominate," are not "authoritative," for their "industriousness" and "patient acceptance of place." Except where these characteristics would mean that a person would not fight for his rights of free citizenship or those of someone else, I would judge such

attributes to be both admirable in themselves and worth instilling in others. In a world of ever increasing sentimentality it is essential to know how to probe, unravel, and evaluate all sorts of grand constructs, and in so doing to be able to recognize one's proper relationship to them. This is the basic sanity of literary criticism. Literary critics may all be made as hatters, but the work itself is okay; it makes sense.

Now here would be a fine point to launch into a professional hymn of praise, and God knows we deserve one, but this was not my intention, and such a hymn would probably be premature by a few months anyway. The purpose of this essay was to report that a literary critic and teacher does something. That done, I leave to others the task of determining that among the various walks of life ours is the most enlightened, the most humane, the most scrupulous and intelligent, and the most essential to national security. For the moment it is enough to note that in the history of human communications there have been relatively few men and women who have heightened our language and the account of our thoughts and actions to a degree where we would look upon ourselves with as much fear and wonder as we would look upon the gods. Then there are some others whose commonplace job it is to remind us that we are only human, a condition complicated and tough enough in itself without seeking higher office, and at times quite splendid, almost satisfactory. These others are saints. One does not ask a saint what he does for a living. □

Copyright, Roger Rosenblatt, 1971
Roger Rosenblatt is an assistant professor of English at Harvard University.

Report From The University of Chicago

Fish Story

Joseph A. Morris

Then down came the schools of the fish:
The schools of the fish swam down in filets.

— Song of the Sardine, 5:13
(New Piscine Bible)

MANKIND SPEWS on, spilling his effluent into the air and the water, thirsting after new realms to dispoil. Prophets of the doom proclaim the liturgy, now familiar, of "The Present Trends." They propound the catechism of "The Moon." They gather themselves into their steel and glass cathedrals, lift their hosts — *slide-rules*, they call them — and their crystal test tube chalices, and they chant the creed: "If the present trends continue, oh Lord, mankind will dirty himself out of existence." They recite

the formula of the mystery of faith:
"The nation that can send a man to the moon can solve all the present ills
...*Nihil obstat.*"

Is it the act of an iconoclast to suggest that the nation has little to do with it? Somehow, one feels, pending legislation notwithstanding, present trends will not continue. One innocently muses, a heretic; mankind is not the master of this ship. A greater power has set the course that frustrates human ambition both to rule the world and to destroy it. Nature soothes, and heals, and works manifold unseen wonders; and maybe, behind our backs, laughs a little at our follies.

Somewhere near Chicago lies a windswept pool called Lake Michigan. Reports have come to us, and they linger, that this water is no mere pond,