Helen Vendler

On Criticism

WALLACE STEVENS once said that the most marvelous bishops of heaven were the ones that made it seem like heaven. The most marvelous critics of Milton are the ones who make him seem more a brilliant singer than an arid theologian. Criticism, then, is first of all the desire to show an artwork as the marvelous thing it is; and secondly, criticism is the finding of words adequate to that task of showing. We can watch the birth of criticism as we might track the birth of a volcano: Rilke sees some paintings by Cézanne, and in spite of his baffled misgivings, finds himself forced to return again and again to the room in which they hang. Soon he is writing to his wife to let her know that he is up against something new, but he cannot yet say what. A little later, he is finding some adjectives; even later, some technical terms; still later, some architectonic metaphors for the paintings. Finally, the enthusiasm gathers into coherent force, and words tumble down the page, lava from an explosion of aesthetic understanding.

Criticism written by poets or novelists is often of a particular urgency because it is a manifesto of their own creative choices. The letters of Keats and Hopkins, the diaries of Virginia Woolf, the prefaces of Shaw, the notebooks of Henry James, and the essays of Eliot contain criticism of this sort. Even the most subdued pages of such writers are warm with concealed passion; their life depends on what they say. Their judgments—of themselves and others—are unfair sometimes, but they are never dull. When Hopkins says of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* that they should be called "charades from the Middle Ages," he hits a nerve, just as he does when he says Browning sounds like a man leaping up from the table with his mouth full of bread and cheese. The ardent partisanship of Keats, the rapier-adjectives of Woolf, the sardonic comedy of Shaw, the feline destructiveness of Eliot, give us a criticism we would be poorer without. This criticism lives without reference, really, to its truth or falsity; it lives because of its strong engagement and its seductive way with words. Every other sort of critic envies it.

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But there is another kind of criticism, written by those who are not poets or novelists or playwrights; this is the criticism, we might say, of professors and journalists. It is often less intimate, less espousing of the work, than the criticism of creative writers; in its judiciousness, and its tendency to rank, it may seem distant or cold or dampening. Reading Dr. Johnson's measured dislike of some of Shakespeare's effects, John Keats crossed out Johnson's words with an emphatic large X, and wrote in the margin, "Is criticism a true thing?" The criticism of the enthusiast and the criticism of the judge are often uneasy bedfellows; but the instinct to rank and to judge in fact derives from the wish to commend, but to commend in intellectual as well as warm-hearted or partisan terms. And intellectual criticism partakes of the inveterate tendencies of all intellectual life: to define, to categorize, to historicize. Intellectual criticism sets itself tasks that writers' criticism is less likely to assume: the establishment of a likely and reliable text; the annotation of difficulties; the contextualizing of aesthetic practice, the history of literary evolution. The great early critics of Shakespeare and Milton were their great early editors.

We might ask, echoing Keats, "Is criticism a useful thing?" Yeats said he wrote his philosophical prose because as a young man he wished the poets he admired had done something of the sort. Such criticism is of peculiar value to young writers, who read Yeats's *Vision* or Nabokov's lectures or Seamus Heaney's essays to see how writers think and feel when they pass into workaday prose. Academic criticism has a more limited shelf-life: marked as it is by the intellectual preoccupations of its generation, it rarely seems convincing a half-century later. The quarrels that were so fierce in the American thirties seem dated now; the stir caused by the essays of Rahv or Burke has abated. Yet who can doubt that energetic diffusion—of recent music by repeated live performance, of new art by museum retrospectives, of contemporary writing by reviews, lectures, and commentaries—is one of the principal ways in which culture is created? If Eliot and Stevens and Moore are familiar presences now, instead of the almost unreadable writers they were when they first appeared, it is because a series of admirers reviewed them sympathetically, wrote commentaries on their theory and practice, republished them in anthologies, lectured on them in classrooms. If a

classic is a work that yields fresh interest to successive cultural master-narratives, then intellectual and aesthetic criticism is the life-support system that infuses the classics with new blood in each generation. Such criticism quietly disappears into the back stacks once its work is done, and becomes of merely historical interest; but it forms part—if a lesser part than the criticism written by the artists themselves—of the history of thought.

How is a critic made? Of enthusiasm and reflection combined, yes, but a third ingredient is necessary: the confidence to believe that the world might want to hear what you think. This confidence is given by those few parents and teachers who genuinely want to hear what the child has to say. I remember when my young son and I saw a Yeats play in the company of Yeats's daughter Anne. Miss Yeats asked my son, perfectly seriously, what he thought of the performance, listened attentively to what he said, and then replied in an adult tone that on the whole she agreed with his remarks, though she perhaps differed in this or that. I could see his confidence rise in direct proportion to her courtesy. And I had a teacher myself, in an undergraduate seminar in modern poetry, who would say to us (editors of the student magazine), after we read a poem by Auden or a poem by Cummings, "Would you print it, Miss X?" I still ascribe some of my confidence to her assumption that we had reasons for judgment and could offer them in public.

When did I first write criticism? We were assigned a senior paper in high school; it was to run to fifteen pages or so. I had just discovered and memorized Hopkins, and had read all I could find about him in the library; when I began to write, pages poured out until the limit had receded into the far distance. A friend remembers my reciting the whole of "The Wreck of the Deutschland" to her on the streetcar the following year, and I think of that as the impulse behind all criticism: to hand on, because it seems too big to be contained solely within oneself, some ardently discovered artwork. Of course, one forgets that not everyone is interested. Sometimes when I'm writing a critical essay, I think of Berryman's "Dream Song 77," where he wonders if anyone wants to hear what he has to say:

> Seedy Henry rose up shy in de world
> & shaved & swung his barbells, duded Henry up

> and p.a'd poor thousands of persons on topics of grand
> moment to Henry, ah to those less & none.

Public address hopes for a public; and I am deeply grateful not only to the judges who awarded me this honor, but also to Truman Capote, who thought criticism worth endowing as a public good. Such a prize encourages us to continue writing, in the hope that our criticism will be, at least for a while, a true thing.

The 1996 Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism in memory of Newton Arvin was presented to Helen Vendler on May 14, 1996 at The University of Iowa. These were her remarks on that occasion.