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What Is the Critic's Job?

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Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth
by A.O. Scott
Penguin, 291 pp., $17.00 (paper)

This Thing We Call Literature
by Arthur Krystal
Oxford University Press, 136 pp., $26.95

Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature
by Erich Auerbach, translated from the German by Willard R. Trask, with an introduction by Edward W. Said
Princeton University Press, 579 pp., $24.95 (paper)

Carmen Henning

A.O. Scott, Brooklyn, October 2015

Two lucid and intelligent books, A.O. Scott's *Better Living Through Criticism* and Arthur Krystal's *This Thing We Call Literature*, explore the same complex theme: criticism as a public art and a public service, performed, however, by critics who speak for themselves, addressing individual readers, not a collective public. Both books draw maps of the disputed border between popular and elite culture and find ways to cross it without pretending it doesn't exist.

Scott is a newspaper critic, Krystal a freelance essayist. Both are tempted by nostalgia for a mid-twentieth-century era before books and ideas lost status and excitement. Each writes outside the academy but cares about what happens inside,

and each laments (in Scott's words) "the normalization and standardization" of academic criticism that treats works of literature as products of social conflicts, economic pressures, or other impersonal forces operating unconsciously through language. Each resists nostalgia by finding ways to think about books and art with renewed urgency.

1.

Scott's title, *Better Living Through Criticism,* alludes ironically to the old DuPont slogan that, until drug culture co-opted it, promised better living through chemistry. The book itself ignores the irony. It praises criticism for offering readers a better life by alerting them to the direct, personal demands that art makes on anyone who listens. At the heart of the book is the conclusion of Rilke's sonnet about a statue in the Louvre, "Antique Torso of Apollo," a sentence, spoken by the poem or the statue, commanding poet and reader: "You must change your life."

Scott reviews films for *The New York Times*. His embarrassment at explicating *Kung Fu Panda II* while preferring Rilke emerges in the whimsically diffident Q-and-A exchanges that outline his argument. The book got its start, A tells Q, when the actor Samuel L. Jackson, offended by Scott's characterization of the superhero movie *The Avengers* as a mere "A.T.M.," provoked "one of those absurd and hyperactive Internet squalls" by tweeting: "AO Scott needs a new job! … One he can ACTUALLY do!" Afterward, Scott, still in his job, began planning a book "asking just what the job of the critic is, and how it might ACTUALLY be done."

"A critic," he writes, "is a person whose interest can help to activate the interest of others." His ideal critic uses whatever knowledge, taste, and wisdom can be brought to the task, but cares less about passing judgment than about understanding the particular ways that a work speaks to one viewer or one reader. Scott doesn't much like Marina Abramović's performance art, in which (for example) she stares across a table at museum visitors and many of them start weeping, but it encapsulates his theme: we "go to an art museum to find connection with another soul."

For Scott, the critic best understands a work when the work seems to understand the critic, when the connection is mutual:

> What Edmund Wilson called the shock of recognition is equally the thrill of being recognized, an uncanny, impossibly but undeniably reciprocal bond that leaps across gaps of logic, history, and culture.

This way of thinking would sound naive in a graduate seminar, but it has notable antecedents. Virginia Woolf wrote:

> The writer must get in touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognizes, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to cooperate in the far more difficult business of intimacy.

W.H. Auden, thinking along similar lines, distinguished between merely consumable "reading matter" and a "Book," which is any "piece of writing which one does not read but is read by." A Book, in reading you, knows you intimately, perhaps better than you know yourself.

Scott's book is less an act of criticism than a defense of criticism illustrated by examples. Explaining that a critic who hopes "to activate the interest of others" does not want others' interest to duplicate his own, he cites Philip Larkin's poem, "Reasons for Attendance." Alone outside a jazz club, Larkin hears music speaking to his solitude:

> *What calls me is that lifted, rough-tongued bell*
> *(Art, if you like) whose individual sound*
> *Insists I too am individual.*

Inside, the couples dancing sexily hear something different:

> *It speaks; I hear; others may hear as well,*
> *But not for me, nor I for them…*

Like anyone attending to the personal voice of art, anyone engaging in Woolf's "difficult business of intimacy," Scott resists being treated as an object to be seduced or manipulated. A few months ago in the *Times*, he was provoked by the latest *Star Wars* spinoff to voice the same complaint he made about *The Avengers*. *Rogue One* merely fills in the plot of the *Star Wars* saga, ignoring "the ethical and strategic problems" raised by its own story:

> Popular art—*Star Wars* included—has often proved itself capable of exploring these kinds of questions [about ends and means] with clarity, vigor and even a measure of nuance. But *Rogue One* has no such ambitions, no will to persuade the audience of anything other than the continued strength of the brand. It doesn't so much preach to the choir as propagandize to the captives.

Like Larkin hearing music insist that he too is individual, Scott wants to respond willfully, actively, to works that say something worth responding to. What is wrong with *Rogue One* is that it lacks even the "will to persuade."

Conversely, what for Scott is wrong with academic criticism is that it lacks the will to respond. In academic life "the normalization and standardization of intellectual activity is the goal," and academic criticism projects onto the arts its own abstract categories, its commitment to generalizing theories. Scott's brief history of its methods cites Lionel Trilling's complaint in 1961 that college classrooms reduce literature's anarchic and personal energies to mere "technicality." A more recent method of reducing literature to impersonal normality, not mentioned by Scott but consistent with his historical account, is the academic habit of speaking about works of art as instances of (in Pierre Bourdieu's phrase) "cultural production," partly generated by involuntary social energies, and made not as personal utterance but for competitive advantage in a shared culture.

Scott insists otherwise, starting on his first page, where his opening epigraph is a long quotation from Oscar Wilde's "The Critic as Artist." One theme of his book is that it is through the act of understanding art that the critic, too, becomes an artist. A critic's vocation starts in the youthful, awed enthusiasm of a mere fan; his excitement then provokes him to learn the history and method that shaped the art that first excited him. This "transformation of awe into understanding" also involves, for the critic, "the claiming of a share of imaginative power." Perceiving the unique value of a work, he finds and creates unique value within himself. In reading as in everything else, a sense of this quality in both parties, the reader and the work being read, is a precondition for intimacy.

In much contemporary culture, perhaps in reaction to the eruption of self-exposing memoirs and declarations of "identity," any claim to a personal viewpoint has come to seem embarrassingly egocentric or aggressive. (This may explain the epidemic in current speech of self-deprecating *you knows* and *likes*.)

Yet in all human relations, a personal perspective makes intimacy possible by providing a rough surface to hold on to. Alan Bennett wrote: “I clung far too long to the notion that shyness was a virtue and not, as I came too late to see, a bore.” A critic who stops feeling shy about his own viewpoint can see more tellingly and accurately than the critic who effaces himself by adopting a general or theoretical perspective. Objective views—as in recent “histories of reading” that explain books as instruments of social and psychological control, or as useful objects for providing desirable feelings or status—tend to trivialize art. Instead, Scott writes:

> The intractable questions that flicker around the edges of our contemplation are best addressed by attending to the play of particular impressions and examples. If we pause to figure out what is happening before our eyes, we may yet catch a glimpse of that rare, perhaps mythical bird, the subjective universal.

The “subjective universal” was Kant’s phrase for aesthetic judgment, which everyone makes individually, but in the conviction that everyone else would agree.

Scott’s book is a defense of criticism, and, like most recent defenses of art and the humanities, it sounds at times as if its author had tacitly acknowledged defeat. His chapters about public matters have an elegiac tone: museums have become sites of consumption; criticism has lost status in the digital age. But he is never elegiac when writing about his private excitement at watching *Bringing Up Baby* or reading Rilke. These chapters justify the art of criticism less through Scott’s arguments than by the force and clarity of his voice.

2.

Arthur Krystal’s fourth collection, *This Thing We Call Literature*, gathers ten essays on a double subject: the special dialogue that connects one reader with one author, and what all such dialogues have in common:

> So it comes down, as it must, to one reader reading, one person who understands that he or she, while alone, is still part of a select society, a gallery of like-minded readers who, though they may disagree about this or that book, know that literature matters in a way that life matters.

Krystal has written a Hollywood screenplay and shrewd, streetwise essays for *Harper's* and *The New Yorker* about typewriters, aphorisms, and duels, but here he cares most about the intellectual life of the university and its influence outside. Half of this book appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Krystal recalls an intellectual world once dominated by Trilling, who wrote in 1942: "What gods were to the ancients at war, ideas are to us." In today's "shrinking world of ideas," Krystal writes, "the liberal arts…are not where the action is," and literary and political ideas have lost their old cultural status to biological theories that trace ideas back to electrical impulses exchanged among neurons, and to social theories that expose the clandestine bias and pervasive cultural forces that unconsciously shape those ideas.

Trilling, Krystal writes, was "possessed by literature," constantly asking (in Krystal's paraphrase): "What is it that literature depends on for its effect?" Forty years after Trilling's death, Krystal asks this same question while reporting on recent academic dogma that denies any qualitative difference between "high literature" and "genre literature" such as thrillers, sci-fi, and romance. Distinctions still matter, Krystal decides, but distinctions among genres matter less than distinctions among authors who, whatever genre they choose, write with a literary sensibility and those who do not.

Virginia Woolf; drawing by David Levine

Krystal's longest chapter is a portrait of the greatest critic-artist of the past century: the German-born philologist Erich Auerbach, revered though generally unread in the academy, and almost unknown outside it. Auerbach, in Krystal's persuasive reading, cared less about questions like Trilling's about the meaning of literature in general than about the particularities of individual authors, local cultures, and historical eras, and about his own perspective on them. Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946) is subtitled *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, and almost everyone who wrote about the book assumed that its subject was "realism" as an idea or a movement—somewhat like Trilling's focus on "moral realism." But Auerbach cared about the specific ways in which individual writers from Homer to Virginia

Woolf shaped and selected the reality they perceived. His book, he insisted, was something tentative, changing, and incomplete. “It seems to me” is one of the characteristic phrases—in *Mimesis* he starts using it in the fifth paragraph—through which he takes personal responsibility for a reading of Homer, Dante, or Cervantes that he knows is unprovable.

For Auerbach, Krystal writes, what matters in literature is inseparable from each individual reader’s “changing relation to the world,” a relation that evolves from moment to moment and across thousands of years of literature. “Auerbach was nothing less than a philosopher of selfhood, a philologist whose focus on etymology and style was the means to determine an historical understanding of the human condition.” The intensifying force of Auerbach’s prose dissipates in brief extracts, but one of Krystal’s quotations captures the tone:

> When people realize that epochs and societies are not to be judged in terms of a pattern concept of what is desirable absolutely speaking but rather in every case in terms of their own premises;…when…they come to develop a sense of historical dynamics, of the incomparability of historical phenomena and of their constant inner mobility; when they come to appreciate the vital unity of individual epochs…; when, finally, they accept the conviction that the meaning of events cannot be grasped in abstract and general forms of cognition…but also in art, economy, material and intellectual culture, in the depths of the workaday world and its men and women, because it is only there that one can grasp what is unique, what is animated by inner forces…: then it is to be expected that those insights will also be transferred to the present and that…the present too will be seen as incomparable and unique….

Krystal comments:

> What we have here is the work of an unrepentant Marxist critic, an elitist bourgeois critic, and a critic of the Annales school; and if we look elsewhere in *Mimesis* and in the essays, we’ll also find the archetype critic, the aesthetic-form critic, and the critic whose “purpose is always to write history.”

All these approaches come together in Auerbach’s distinctive sensibility, his style of exposition and argument, his restless way of trying out whatever intellectual and historical approach might be useful for the matter at hand. His work, he said,

is “a challenge to the reader’s will to interpretive synthesis,” by pursuing instead “not one order and one interpretation, but many.”

Much of Krystal’s book, like Scott’s, is elegiac. The mid-century proponents of general ideas of culture and literature have faded, and the ideas have faded with them. In striking contrast, Krystal’s essay on Auerbach celebrates a way of reading that seems perennially and immediately present: in Auerbach’s phrase about a soul in Dante’s paradise, “a living reality.” Krystal’s essay achieves criticism’s most useful task: it sends a reader back to an author with renewed excitement.

3.

Erich Auerbach was born in Berlin in 1892, earned a law degree in 1913, worked for the Prussian State Library in the 1920s, became a professor at Marburg in 1929, then at Istanbul in wartime exile when he wrote *Mimesis*, finally at Yale until his death in 1957. His first book, *Dante, Poet of the Secular World* (1929), written while he worked as a librarian, is so vivid and excited that it seems to have been written yesterday. Its theme—Auerbach’s lifelong theme—is the dignity and depth of the self, a “constant” in European culture,

> which has come down unchanged through all the metamorphoses of religious and philosophical forms, and which is first discernible in Dante; namely, the idea…that individual destiny is not meaningless, but is necessarily tragic and significant, and that the whole world context is revealed in it.

Everyone’s selfhood gives access to all the world. Auerbach associates this idea with modern European culture, but adds that it “was already present in ancient mimesis.” (The Greek word means the imitation of reality in art and literature.) Even in Homer, the self was the encyclopedia of the world, and Auerbach’s phrase “ancient mimesis” is the germ of his masterwork.

Auerbach portrays Dante discovering the purpose and ambition that issued in the *Commedia*. Poverty and exile provoked him to inward triumphs: “not by Stoic asceticism and renunciation, but by taking account of historical events, by mastering them and ordering them in his mind—that was the task to which his character drove him.” This is also, unmistakably, Auerbach’s self-portrait as he discovers—long before imagining his own exile—his ambition to master and

order historical events in his mind. Auerbach recognized Dante as infinitely greater than himself, but, as in Scott's phrase about the critic growing into his vocation, he claimed a share of Dante's imaginative power.

Mimesis is a vast, rapid panorama of European literature in twenty sharply focused chapters, starting with the *Odyssey*, ending with *To the Lighthouse*. Its learned style conceals exuberant artistry. One example: Auerbach's metaphoric phrase "Napoleon's fall threw Stendhal out of the saddle" alludes to the moment in *Le Rouge et le Noir* when Julien Sorel, newly installed in the aristocratic household where his hero Napoleon's name cannot be spoken, literally is thrown from the saddle.

Almost every chapter in *Mimesis* begins with one or two extended quotations, followed by philological accounts of notable words; then by discussions of various other literary, historical, and sociological matters. The chapter on Stendhal, for example, deploys biography, personal psychology, and economic, political, and religious history to explain the repressed boredom of aristocratic life that makes Julien's energy so exciting to the Marquis's daughter. Auerbach always tries, "insofar as that is still possible, to attain a clear understanding of what the work meant to its author and his contemporaries." To interpret the past according to a modern theory, he wrote, is "unhistorical and dilettantish."

For Auerbach, a critic could understand a past author's unique perspective only from a unique perspective of his own. When an envious rival, Ernst Robert Curtius, refuted the "theoretical construct" of *Mimesis*, Auerbach replied that his book "is no theoretical construct; it aims to offer a view." If possible, he "would not have used any generalizing expressions at all." He did not use words like realism and moralism to evoke general ideas: those words "should acquire their meaning only from the context, and in fact from the particular context."

Erich Auerbach

Many academic critics refused to believe what Auerbach said about *Mimesis*. The book was interpreted not only as a study of "realism" but

also, through its choice of examples, as either pro- or anti-German (it was a mistake, Auerbach replied, to attribute his selection to any "preferences or aversions of a fundamental kind"), and as a reflection on his Jewishness—for some critics, a celebration of it, for others, a rejection. "There's something almost comical in this clash of opinion," Krystal observes. But the clash is inevitable in an academic culture that perceives a writer as embodying some general tendency or category, not as a genius speaking for himself.

In scale and ambition, *Mimesis* is Auerbach's *Commedia*. Dante's journey begins in hellish alienation, proceeds through purgatorial humility, and culminates in paradisal harmony. Auerbach's journey begins in the detached objective reality that he found in the *Odyssey*; he proceeds through the world-changing effects of Peter's denial and repentance in the Gospels, the universal significance of a fisherman's inner life; and he arrives at last—via Boccaccio, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Schiller—at the sympathetic inwardness of *To the Lighthouse*. As Auerbach had done earlier with Dante, now he identifies himself with Virginia Woolf. Her method, he writes, is part of a modern shift of emphasis, a new sense

> that in any random fragment plucked from the course of a life at any time the totality of its fate is contained and can be portrayed…. It is possible to compare this technique of modern writers with that of certain modern philologists who hold that the interpretation of a few passages…can be made to yield more, and more decisive information…than would a systematic and chronological treatment…. Indeed, the present book may be cited as an illustration.

He shares Woolf's tentative vision of reality. He writes about his authors as she writes about Mrs. Ramsay, as "someone who doubts, wonders, hesitates, as though the truth about her characters were not better known to her than it is to them or to the reader." And he notes "a similarity" between her method and Dante's: both use concentrated moments of thought and speech—in the course of three consecutive days in the *Commedia*, two separated days in *To the Lighthouse*—to portray life in its wholeness and significance.

In a long, impassioned paragraph he praises Woolf's method and justifies his own:

> The things that happen to a few individuals in the course of a few minutes, hours, or possibly even days—these one can hope to report with reasonable

> completeness. And here…one comes upon the order and the interpretation of life which arise from life itself: that is, those which grow up in the individuals themselves, which are to be discerned in their thoughts, their consciousness, and in a more concealed form in their words and actions. For there is always going on within us a process of formulation and interpretation whose subject matter is our own self. We are constantly endeavoring to give meaning and order to our lives…, to our surroundings, the world in which we live.

In a later essay, Auerbach paraphrases the eighteenth-century historiography of Giambattista Vico, who wrote that we understand thoughts and acts from the remote past through their continuing presence in "the potentialities (Vico's term is *modificazioni*) of our own human mind." Auerbach uses Vico's term again, a few pages later, about his own acts of interpretation: "What we understand and love in a work is a human existence, a possibility of 'modifications' within ourselves." In any literary work that he loved, Auerbach heard a variation of what Rilke's sonnet said: You have potentialities within yourself; you can change your life.

In his great essay "*Figura*," Auerbach made clear that his way of interpreting books derived from a medieval way of thinking about persons that Dante had dramatized in the *Commedia*. Human beings, in this view, were unique selves at particular moments of history who were also, simultaneously, vehicles of divine, universal revelation. Their uniqueness did not dissolve into symbol or allegory; the more you perceived their particularity, the more you understood their significance. For Auerbach, as for Virginia Woolf, this double sense of human meaning had lost the supernatural sanction that it had for Dante, but it derived ultimately from the religious doctrine of Christ's double nature, simultaneously mortal and divine.

Almost everything Auerbach wrote contains fragments of an exact inner picture of himself. Like the souls in the *Commedia*, he revealed much in a few sentences: his democratic fascination with everyday life, common language, popular art, and "the elementary things which men in general [*die Menschen*] have in common"; his annoyance at pedants, ideologues, and "arrogant rationalism"; his conviction (visible in his essay on Pascal) that the injustices he commits deserve more of his attention than the injustices he suffers; his pleasure (expressed as he describes the marriage of Poverty and St. Francis in the *Paradiso*) in an earthy, unidealizing

sexual imagination. In a typical sentence, after describing the contrasting historical settings in which Montaigne and Pascal came to different views of social custom—Montaigne tolerant, Pascal appalled—Auerbach wrote: "Still, I believe it was Pascal's character more than the historical circumstances that led him" to think as he did.

"My own experience," Auerbach wrote, "is responsible for the choice of problems, the starting points, the reasoning and the intention expressed in my writings." He grounded his work in the realities of emotion. He wrote that the classic hierarchy of styles, from high tragic to low grotesque, though much disputed, "corresponds to human feeling, in Europe at least; it cannot be argued away." Yet, he continued, hierarchy can also be transformed by human feeling. In modern literature, as in Peter's denial, low subjects could have tragic dignity: "The subject matter became serious and great through the intention of those who gave it form."

Auerbach wrote for readers who valued their own inner experience. The only "approval" he sought was "the consent (which is bound to be variable and never complete) of those who have arrived at similar experience by other paths, so that my experience may serve to clarify, to complement, and perhaps to stimulate theirs."

In the introduction to his posthumous last book, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (1958), Auerbach wrote that despite its "singleness of purpose," the book—which filled a large gap in the historical continuity of *Mimesis*—remained "a series of fragments." It was "still in search of its theme." He concluded: "Perhaps its readers will help in the search; perhaps one of them, by giving more precise and effective expression to what I have tried to say, will find the theme." In this last sentence that he wrote for publication, he hoped for one reader to consent to the difficult business of intimacy and know him better than he knew himself.

—In memory of Robert B. Silvers
