

# CRITICISM AND CULTURE

by John E. Becker

The urgency of our times has engendered demands for action, and action has followed: economic, political, diplomatic. We are concerned for the technical competence of those who are acting. But surely there are other and even more fundamental concerns. Action too easily distracts from the assumptions on which action is based. Many of those assumptions are born in that dark region of the popular imagination where nations define themselves in terms of basic myths of national mission and national identity. We are tempted by, and too easily succumb to, oversimple versions of those myths. Urgent as is our need for action, we need reflection more.

The basic instrument of reflection on national identity and mission is literature, and ours is incredibly rich. Literature has helped both to shape and to reveal that obscure popular imagination and has criticized the ways it has shaped itself. Artists tell us so much of profound importance about ourselves that one wonders how we can afford to ignore them as we do. Who, then, is supposed to be keeping our minds to these texts, placing them before us and making us read them correctly?

Most of us are willing to allow that literature must have its scholars, though few of us may read them. Texts have to be discovered, edited, protected, transmitted. Sometimes biographies are important, and sometimes historical background must be filled in. And beyond these functions lies the large and largely undefined terrain of literary criticism. Contemporary criticism seems to be going in several directions at once. Some critics insist that they are artists, as novelists and poets are artists. Other critics, moving in the direction of science, study texts with the methodology of linguistics and the nascent science of semiotics. At its most abstract this tendency takes criticism in the direction of the science of mind.

Antedating these tendencies, however, is a still-living tradition of criticism that maintains a strong sense of responsibility for criticizing culture. It makes sense. To fumble through the complexities of literature is, in some way, to fumble through the coils of the collective mind. Of course every practitioner of the

humanities fumbles there: sociologist, psychologist, anthropologist, political scientist, historian, and journalist. Undoubtedly all consider their insights privileged. Yet uncertain as the critic's claim to privileged knowledge may be, his task is unique, for he comments on those peculiar combinations of wish-fulfillment fantasy and hard-nosed realism that make up great works of literature. Other practitioners, it would seem, suppose they must cut through the myths to reality. But the literary critic considers as naive the idea of a reality beyond myth; and he jealously guards his right to analyze and observe the world in terms of literature's unstable amalgam of fantasy and fact.

Unexamined myths make uncontrollable war on facts; they make nations do things in spite of facts. We need to know if we the people, wielding our immense power, are driven by a pious image of ourselves as a redeemer nation for all mankind or by macho imperialistic heroics; whether by fantasies of cool technological omnipotence or by an ideal of managerial efficiency manipulating mankind into happiness despite itself. Does the literary critic with his peculiar vision succeed in telling us anything vital about this?

The question is a broad one, and I intend to make it specific by applying it to three examples of literarily based commentaries on culture. One is altogether conventional, in the sense that we have no difficulty locating it clearly within the traditional area of literary criticism. I refer to the works on American literature of Larzer Ziff, a critic strongly committed to reading literature in its historical and cultural contexts. The second is T. J. Jackson Lears's *No Place of Grace*, a book that has been placed by at least one reviewer within the less clearly defined genre of American studies. The last is a work on pedagogy, Bruno Bettelheim and Karen Zelan's *On Learning to Read*. Though its inclusion may seem anomalous at first glance, it is, whatever else it may be, a book of cultural criticism, and a most startling and effective one.

I intend to discuss these books, however, less for what they say than for the authority they are able to establish for saying it. We do not very much need, it seems to me, the present unstoppable flow of appreciative academic criticism. It has had a certain homiletic value, keeping alive, as once did the Sunday sermon for the Bible, a leisured interest in our secular texts. We need critics who can make us believe in the

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power of those texts to reveal us to ourselves, critics who feel the urgency of our need to reflect. As Melville has shown us, there are lots of ways of looking at Leviathan. The easiest, the least useful, and the most dangerous is to look at "theirs" as bad and "ours" as good. What hope is there for our people to overcome that neat and tempting dichotomy?

#### A SENSE OF THE TIMES

*No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (Pantheon, xx+375 pp.; \$17.95) is thick with detail, some of it novel and interesting; but it is a disappointing book to read. Lears's refrain, repeated at intervals throughout the volume, is a lament for the loss of "firm religious or ethical commitments":

I am disturbed by the signs of spiritual sterility which surround us in the late twentieth century. I have tried to write an historically informed critique of modern capitalist culture without succumbing either to nostalgia or the "progressive" bromides of the Left.

Lears's analysis runs like this: For centuries the morality of individualism, the morality of free enterprise at all levels of human activity—commercial, intellectual, and theological—undermined the authority of king and church. Then in the late nineteenth century the "shift from the disorganized entrepreneurial capitalism of the earlier nineteenth century to the organized corporate capitalism of our own time" required the spokesmen of culture to discover new ways of preserving the old sense of the free and heroic individual in a world driving toward greater and greater organization, toward stabilized consumer markets and the absorption of the individual into corporate enterprise. Their answer: The material progress of America verifies and affirms the moral progress of mankind, and all Americans are participants in that heroic enterprise. This was the keynote of both sacred and secular oratory. The result: a culture of "evasive banality" within which we still live. Americans do not address their social problems at the roots; or if they do, their social protest is rapidly transformed into a change of life-style. Americans sublimate; they go to therapy; they adjust. They create an interior and private heroism that allows them to evade the outer banality of their lives.

This analysis comes very early in the book. And Lears does little else but flesh it out with detail. Some of the detail is interesting: the arts and crafts movement, the fascination with Catholic aesthetic traditions minus the theology (it is pleasant to know how that lovely little gothic Presbyterian church I see each morning as I drive to my classes got to be gothic). But Lears ends up saying little more than he said at the beginning.

Lears's diagnosis is not implausible, but the book fails to give one a sense of certitude. Lears has set out to map a jungle—or a desert—but his paths seem merely his own, arbitrary, and not the ones I or anyone else would have found or marked. Perhaps it is a general problem of American studies: the lack of a methodology by which to judge the relevance of the

masses of its evidence. But ultimately Lears fails to put us in touch with either the times he describes or with our own.

It is not fair to call into question the credibility of a discipline like American studies because of the failure of a particular book. But it does serve to illustrate the problem that particular discipline faces. It is a problem of less importance to the traditional literary critic. His subject matter has been chosen for him for the most part. Over the years an anonymous but very vital literary "institution" has sorted out the accepted texts and forgotten the rest. The critic may rely on the culture's own sense of itself, and though he may wish to call our attention to one or another of the forgotten texts, his use of the broadly accepted ones gives us a sense of an already established relevance. Perhaps for this reason Larzer Ziff's *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (Viking Press, 1966) gives us a much stronger sense of the times, both those times and our own. It is not that Ziff's analysis comes to different or more plausible conclusions. Rather, in talking about literature, Ziff is talking about that which exists today, has survived the times. The past social context is important because we still read the writers; they are here and now with us in their texts. If they were afflicted with something of the evasive banality Lears speaks of, they still managed to make it memorable. Survival, in other words, implies that some writers touch a strain of myth that is continuous with our own myths and make us see ourselves in the lyrics and stories of their times.

#### MYTHIC CONTINUITY

Only in his very recent *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America* (Viking; xxv+333 pp.; \$15.95) has Ziff ventured to address the major works of the American Renaissance. His readings are in many ways inerrant; they are also straightforward, rarely precious or intricate. His definition of the relationship of literature to society is right:

Just as mass is finally inseparable from its field of force because it is fundamentally an intense form of the energy that surrounds it, so, I believe, literature is a particular concentration of cultural forces continuous with, rather than apart from society. Accordingly...I am not so much concerned with literature as a mirror of society—which it is only from a limited and simplified point of view—as with literature as a unique and intense social form.

What Ziff says about the works of Hawthorne seems to me wonderfully accurate. He understands Hawthorne as the American writer who most clearly saw that we cannot escape from history, that we cannot find our values in an atemporal abstraction called "nature" or the "ideal." But what Ziff says of Poe seems detached from Poe's work, the merely personal meditations of a critic who does not try to establish the validity of his interpretation. It is curious and frustrating to have Ziff say that "Melville, by war's start, had lapsed into a near-silence that lasted till he died;..." It is true that Melville stopped publishing the

fiction, but his poetry of the Civil War is eloquent in its symbolic rendition of the loss of a sense of America's historical mission: leading the forward march of humanity toward freedom. In these poems Melville played wonderful variations on the dominance of cyclic over linear images of time. The dominant cyclic images are rigid, impersonal, and threatening, like the swing of the planets or the iron dome of the capitol; or they are benevolent, like the wheeling of the swallows at Shiloh. And the linear images are almost all images of troops marching into the "volland glare" of death. The old democratic optimism of linear progress is obliterated by death, and history is reduced once more to the atheist cycle of the seasons, the rise and fall of empires. America, no longer the hope of all mankind, is another of those empires doomed to fall.

In "Billy Budd," his final work of fiction, Melville does not lose himself, as most of his critics have been lost, in an abstract and timeless confrontation between good and evil. Ziff only partly escapes this misreading. Melville's story, he rightly notes, is about historically defined conceptions of good and evil: the redeeming force of the common man, idealized in Billy, and the moral ambiguities of a world of war and gratuitous human malice. But "Billy Budd" remains an allegory of historically definable good and evil, and it is difficult to understand what Ziff could mean when he says that it offers "a supernatural explanation of life." Billy is a Christ figure, but a secular one, and he belongs to his moment in history; he is not timeless innocence. Melville's conception of Christ is more theological than sentimental; for him Christ was once at the center of human history, the man-God who brought God's guidance of history to its conclusion. That older hope in Christ was betrayed centuries before by the Church's collusion in war. Billy, the common man, is a new and secular version of Christ, a new center of history, a new secular hope. But, as the story shows, the ideal of the common man cannot redeem mankind from war or malice. Melville's long silence is eloquent with the sense of historical hope lost.

Though Ziff writes excellent commentary on American culture, a sense of dissatisfaction remains. The urgency of our times requires, it seems to me, that the critic give us a more vivid sense of the mythic continuity that makes us hold on, as best we can, to Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. They must be telling us something important today or no one would be reading them. They are, in other words, documents of our own time as much as they are documents of the time of their origin. Why we need Shakespeare, the Book of Job, Melville, and Dante *now* is the important question. If critics could talk to us with that in mind, perhaps they could give us much deeper insight into the lies we tend to tell ourselves.

#### NEW WORLDS TO EXPLORE

The lies we tell ourselves is the theme of Lears's book, and of Ziff's book on the 1890s. It is most startlingly and disturbingly the theme of Bruno Bettelheim and Karen Zelan's *On Learning to Read: The Child's*

*Fascination With Meaning* (Alfred A. Knopf; x+306 pp.; \$13.95). Two points, intimately related, constitute the book's message:

1. The misreadings of primary school students are meaningful, and it is but reasonable pedagogy to accept their misreadings as interesting. Once that is done, the child seems invariably to return to the text and correct himself. This is illustrated over and over through this book, and at a point it becomes a belaboring of the obvious. The authors may be forgiven; their experience with the many primary school teachers with whom they worked demonstrates conclusively how alien this sort of thinking is to them. Decoding—that is the teacher's conception of what he teaches, a skill as impersonal as accounting or measuring out pills in a pharmacy. But that the child's errors might express unconscious or preconscious fears, boredom, or enraged rejection of what is being read implies that reading is a highly personal act in which the child identifies with the voices and the words of the stories he reads and accepts or rejects them on the basis of his own experience and observation. This is a valuable pedagogical insight and important to us because of its intimate relation to the second point.

2. The authors do not begin their book with the problem of misreading. They begin with the utter vacuity of the texts out of which teachers teach; and they end there too with an illuminating comparison of the primers of American schools and those of several European nations. Here is cultural criticism at its startling best; Bettelheim and Zelan bring us deep into the other belly of our bureaucratic beast.

What is the relation of American primers to the large issues we have been discussing? Bettelheim cites a personal experience:

I was randomly involved in an experimental effort to produce a more attractive reader for the first grade. One of its stories tried to arouse some interest by narrating a small tragedy of childhood. Children had gotten a balloon at a fair. They took the balloon home, where a cat jumped on it and it burst. This seemed harmless enough, but when a school system in Illinois tested out this book before it went into large-scale production, the cat lovers of Illinois raised outraged objections: the story maligned cats, set children against animals, and so on. They threatened a campaign against the local school superintendent, who was soon up for reelection. He thought it best to withdraw the book. Fearing similar setbacks for his new series, the publisher decided to include only content against which nobody could possibly object.

The anecdote rings so true—and large. It has the inevitability and certitude of deep-rooted cultural logic, as basic as two plus two. It is what we might have expected after reading Frances Fitzgerald's *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Little Brown, 1979). The same political pressures that kept those histories purified of analysis keeps primers purified. Of what? Of everything. The official censorship of Communist nations seems hardly a rival for the freedom-loving power of the massed cat lovers of Illinois.

Children, the book shows us, hate the condescension of these readers, the vocabulary inferior to their spoken vocabulary, the absurdly rose-colored vision of human relationships. They hate being made to read aloud absurdities they would never utter and that no



adult would take seriously for a second. And here Bettelheim helps us with a splendid illustration. An older form of teaching, in a time and a culture to which we cannot return, was based on the Bible. The Bible had the terrific advantage and excitement, in a child's eye, of being not only interesting and strange but also a text that adults took seriously. What a difference it would make to children to know that they were studying one of the texts by which their parents and teachers understand and govern their lives.

Because teachers cannot take their primers seriously and because children can find nothing in them to open their eyes to the new worlds that reading is supposed to reveal, adult and child meet only at the level of pure and abstract skill, decoding meaningless Dick-and-Jane words in a pathetic conspiracy of ignorance and concealed hostility. There is nothing far-fetched about this diagnosis; all of us have anecdotal evidence of it from our children and their friends. Hatred of school, however, is not the end of it.

America's primers are suffused, Bettelheim notes, with a "fun morality." Stories never tell of anything significant coming from school work. School buildings hardly exist in the landscape of their illustrations; stories are about what children do when they are out of school. And there is a dominant impression that gifts define the relationship between parents and children. Yet children are intensely interested in work; and they are worried about human relationships: new children in the family, strange children from the next block, the disasters and the joys of losing and finding friends.

What, one asks, would a child be like who survived this regimen of meaningless and impersonal drill long enough to arrive at a university? He or she would insist, as so many do today, on being trained for the job market and not being bothered with literature. The job market means the nine-to-five segment of life that produces the money for the consumption of pleasure-goods but rarely the satisfaction of doing something of value. The problem of teaching literature to these children of Dick and Jane is the problem of any discipline that demands a mind free and open to the questioning of fundamental myths and values and eager to know of new ways of thinking. Too few students can afford that. They consider the imaginative exploration of new worlds a luxury rather than the constitutive and distinctively human dimension of life. Yet human beings, biologically speaking, do one thing better than anything else: learn.

Luckily there are students who reject the emptiness of their primary school readers. They sneak into the libraries of their uncles, older sisters, grandfathers and read literature that is over their heads and full of words they do not understand. New worlds open before their interest, and they pursue them into universities. There is hope.

But if ever you have wondered why it is so difficult to get students to read serious literature, when the whole history of human culture shows that the story and the song of triumph are as necessary to the hunt as the hunt is to song and story; if ever you have wondered why that which in all other cultures is spontaneous and wonderful is treated by us as precious, bothersomely complicated, and faintly undemocratic, you will find out in this book.

The strange chimeras that paraded before the imaginations of late-nineteenth-century writers, the wild bravado that connects our nuclear macho with Teddy Roosevelt's cowboy salvation, the boring and perverse detail of literary naturalism, the idiot idealization of the criminal—all of these were born, according to the critics considered here, of that evasive banality to which American popular culture has been committed for over a century. When so simple a reality as a cat pouncing on a balloon must be denied recognition, then what of significance can a young person ever hope to find by reading a book? Writers become desperate and exaggerate; readers shrug and walk away.

The children of Dick and Jane, however, make an appropriate audience for the rhetoric of politicians. Sometimes the rhetoric is a bit too clearly reminiscent of primary school. When the president of the United States urges us all to a private philanthropy that is utterly helpless before the problems of poverty and discrimination, he speaks to us in terms we recognize all too well: New York, he tells us, is "that tough little tug that can pull our ship of state off the shoals and out into open water." One wonders, after he catches his breath, what that tough old New York sailor Melville would have said to this. No, one doesn't wonder. He would have said nothing. He had already said it all, over and over, and no one listened. [vvv]