
Reviews

'Beyond Presentness': The Practice of Criticism

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The Critic as Conservator: Essays in Literature, Society, and Culture, by George A. Panichas. *Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992. xii+262 pp. \$49.95.*

The last two decades have witnessed a veritable revolution in literary studies. What had seemed for years to be a staid and indeed safe field of academic inquiry has been radically politicized—becoming, if not dangerous, certainly volatile and unstable. For almost a century, literary scholars in British and American universities followed Matthew Arnold's lead in working to teach and preserve "the best that has been known and thought." But today many scholars view criticism as a vehicle for political and social change, specifically political redress. This is because a war of sorts erupted behind the academy's ivy-covered walls during the 1970s and '80s concerning both what to read and how to read it, the value of tradition and the tradition of values; and today, as the smoke clears from the

intellectual battlefield, the forces of radical change appear to have emerged victorious. The ascendancy of "theory" has fundamentally altered what it means to practice criticism within the academy, and political and cultural studies almost entirely have replaced aesthetic ones. Indeed, it sometimes seems that the radical position which views tradition and inheritance as a mask for oppression and domination goes unchallenged these days. After all, the voices that most stridently advocate such a position dominate the important professional organizations, the editorial boards of literary journals, and the hiring committees within academic departments. Voices of opposition can be heard outside of the academy, in newspaper columns, magazine articles, and even books, but within de-

partments of literature the revolution goes on, largely unchallenged.

George Panichas' *The Critic as Conservator* is a rare challenge from within. A professor of English at the University of Maryland (and the long-time editor of *Modern Age*), Panichas views what has happened to literary criticism with disdain. Today "literary and critical values have been diminished and uglified," he writes: "The criteria of retention and salvation, of conservation and continuity are routinely glossed over, derided, dismissed," and as a consequence "[we] find ourselves mired in decadence and nihilism." As his title suggests, his is a distinctly anti-revolutionary challenge. In the twenty essays collected in this volume, Panichas proposes to defend criticism as an instrument of preservation, and thus to counter the "boasts of change" that today "reach shrill and oppressive proportions." Not content just to sound an alarm, Panichas takes it as his task to issue a call for resistance. "In a profane age of unrest and breakdown, it is not enough for the critic to be purely and simply critical," he contends: "He [the critic] must fight for causes he believes in, even if they appear to be lost causes. The critic's burden of responsibility is also his vision of order."

These are eloquent words, and the strongest essays in Panichas' book are the ones in which he attempts to bear precisely that burden. Writing about the work of Irving Babbitt, D. H. Lawrence, Henry James, and most notably Simone Weil, he reads literature in an effort to discern and then transmit a vision of moral order. That

vision is inherently religious, and at one point Panichas speaks directly to the relationship between religion as a moral force and literature as an aesthetic form:

The literature that makes us aware of that "other" world in which, as Simone Weil says, "the highest things are achieved," makes us aware of the religious problem that embraces ultimate concerns and ultimate questions and gives meaning to time. In the relationship between literature and religion we can discover a revelatory critical confluence that becomes a medium for an encounter and, in effect, a conversation with God.

In Panichas' view, the critic's responsibility consists, first, in identifying the literature that indeed reveals "the highest things," and then in articulating how this time-bound aesthetic form can function as a means of transcendent revelation.

The most important part of Panichas' challenge to contemporary criticism is in his insistence that great literature inevitably contains a spiritual element—not as dogma or doctrine, but as aspiration or quest, "a reaching out after invisible things." This means that great literature aspires to universality, reaching "beyond presentness" and thus beyond the merely political. The mantra of "race, class, and gender" that echoes through literary studies today needs to be countered, not because such things are unimportant, but because concentrating so exclusively upon them robs literature of its power, mak-

ing it nothing more than a sociological appendage to present politics. For Panichas, the critic's attitude towards his work should always be infused with a deep and almost reverent respect. This is because, in the presence of great literature, one can be in the presence of something more than the here and now—something more than “the immediate and the expedient, the relativistic, the empirical.” And it is through writing and teaching, through the *practice* of criticism, that the critic is able to bring others to that presence. Thus Panichas quotes approvingly from Henry James: “[The critic] has to understand for others, to answer for them; he is always under arms.”

Panichas' defense of criticism as an instrument of conservation is eloquent, and his own practice of such criticism is moving and effective. Many of the essays in this book, however, are concerned with neither literature nor criticism. Instead, as the subtitle indicates, they focus on “society and culture,” and here Panichas is less convincing and less successful. Part of the problem is that he seems somewhat envious of those who have achieved success within the contemporary culture he so disdains. When he complains about being “consigned to a small band of cranky traditionalists . . . who, in terms of national honors and munificent foundation grants, find doors shut against them,” he sounds just that—cranky—as he does when he objects to reviews of his own work or laments the “fidgetiness” and “uncivil whispers” that greeted a lecture he gave at a scholarly conference.

This is a problem of tone, but the bigger problem involves content. When writing about society and culture, Panichas no longer looks beyond the immediate or the political, no longer reaches past the time-bound to the timeless. Instead, he simply (and repeatedly) objects to current trends, argues against contemporary developments, and complains about the late-twentieth-century *zeitgeist*.

There surely is plenty to complain about here, but Panichas' own definition of the critic's responsibility involves more than complaint. By focusing so narrowly on the ills of contemporary intellectual culture in some of these essays, he runs the risk of infection—that is, of having readers view his criticism simply in light of the political realities of the present moment. In the essay that provides him with his title, Panichas declares that the critic—of society and culture, not just literature and art—should be a conservator. But he remains unclear on the essential question—a conservator of what?

If the answer to that question is that the critic should work to conserve a way of looking at or beyond the world that completely transcends political realities, then Panichas is issuing one kind of challenge to contemporary criticism. But if the answer is that the critic should work to preserve historically established habits of mind and spirit, past ways of looking at the world, then he is issuing a very different kind of challenge. The first is at odds not only with contemporary criticism's revolution but also with traditional criticism's advocacy

of “the best that has been known and thought.” As a challenge, it is essentially private, for it relies upon an almost mystical communion between the time-bound individual and “the highest things.” But the second answer is more public. It counters the radical position that dominates contemporary criticism by calling for a different politics—those of return and renewal rather than change and overthrow. As a challenge, it can function as a call to arms, but also as an invitation for dialogue, a possible overture of peace. Panichas does not much sound like a peace-maker in this book; but then the difficulty of reading it comes not in deciding what he objects to, but in figuring out exactly

what he wants in its stead. “[The critic] must work to conserve what is timeless, time-tested, time-honored,” he writes. The problem is that much of what is time-tested is not at all timeless, and that much of what may be timeless has hardly been time-tested at all. Panichas claims to stand for “beliefs that prescribe a unifying adherence to the faculty of memory, to certitudes, and above all, to standards.” But human memory is fallible, which means that standards are often uncertain, and that certitudes are rarely standard. Plainly, universal truth and historically enduring values are not necessarily the same thing. Too often *The Critic as Conservator* assumes that they are.