

Criticism in a Mass Society

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We are frequently and correctly told that one of the most precious privileges of a democratic state is the right to free self-criticism. If we care, then, about the preservation of that democracy, our first duty is to discover how this right is, in fact, exercised. It will not take us long to discover that in a modern society, whatever its political form, the great majority prefer opinion to knowledge, and passively allow the former to be imposed upon them by a centralized few – I need only mention as in example the influence of the Sunday book supplements of the newspapers upon our public libraries.

If we are concerned, as I think we should be, at this trend, we shall accomplish nothing by cries of lamentation or superior sneers; we cannot hope to effect any reform unless we can discover, firstly, what it is in the structure of our society that makes for this state of affairs, secondly, how far the molding of the opinions of the few by the many is inevitable, and then what steps it is possible to take within the inevitable to minimize its dangers and take advantage of its possibilities.

1. There are two types of society: closed societies and open.

2. All human societies begin by being of the closed type, but, except when they have stagnated or died, they have always evolved toward an ever more and more open type. Up until the industrial revolution this evolution was so gradual as hardly to be perceptible within the life-span of an individual, but since then the rate of development has ever increasingly accelerated.

3. The evolutionary process is complicated by the fact that different sections of the community progress toward the open society at different speeds. At any given point in history there are classes for whom economic, political, and cultural advantages make society relatively open, and, vice versa, those for whom similar disadvantages make it relatively closed, but in comparing one historical epoch with its preceding one, all classes are seen to have made some evolution in the same direction.

4. When we use the word democracy we do not or should not mean any particular form of political structure; such matters are secondary. What we mean or ought to mean is the completely open society.

5. The technical obstacles to this have been overcome. What is holding us back is the failure of totalitarians and democrats alike to realize how open society has already physically become, so that we continue to apply habits of mind which were more or less adequate to the relatively closed society of the eighteenth century to an open society which demands completely new ones. The failure of the human race to acquire the habits that an open society demands if it is to function properly, is leading an increasing number of people to the conclusion that an open society is impossible, and that, therefore, the only escape from economic and spiritual disaster is to return as quickly as possible to a closed type of society. But social evolution, fortunately or unfortunately, is irreversible. A mechanized and differentiated closed society is a self-contradiction. We have in fact no choice at all; we have to adapt ourselves to an open society or perish.

No human community of course has ever been completely closed, and none probably will ever be completely open, but from the researches of anthropologists and historians, we can construct a Platonic idea of both.

Ideally, a closed society is physically segregated, economically autonomous and without cultural contact with other communities. Occupationally it is undifferentiated; everyone does the same kind of work, agriculture, fishing, hunting, etc.; such differences as exist are based on biological differences of sex and age. In the education of the young there is no distinction between vocational or technical and cultural or moral training; all activities are governed by tradition; the right thing to do is inseparable from the right way of doing it (an identity found today only in compulsion neurosis). Education ends with puberty; to be mature means to be socially normal. In contrast to its primitive economy, the character type imposed on all its members is extremely specialized and may vary fantastically from one closed society to another; the Arapesh type, for example, is cooperative and pacific, the Dobu type is a paranoiac. Aberrant individuals who fail to be conditioned must become either hermits or saboteurs. Art as a means to satisfy internal

psychic needs and science as a means to satisfy external material needs, are included in an undifferentiated complex of communal activities; it is not realized that an incantatory curse is intrinsically different from a stab with a knife.

The religion by which it lives is polytheistic: little or no distinction is drawn between the particular and the universal, the sign and its signification. In its taboos and regulations it has not learned to distinguish between propositions or statements which can be proved true or false by immediate experiment, and presuppositions or professions of faith. Since the individual is scarcely differentiated from the whole and technique is primitive, freedom consists largely in a consciousness of causal necessity either in the form of the forces of nature or of the social pressures of tradition, and to only a very slight degree in a consciousness of logical necessity. The motto of such a society is that of the trolls in Peer Gynt – to thyself be enough.

The ideal open society on the other hand would know no physical, economic or cultural frontiers. Conscious both of what it possessed and what it lacked, it would exchange freely with all others. Occupationally specialized, the range of occupations to choose from would be so wide that there would be no one, however exceptional his nature, who could not find his genuine vocation. Such a community would be tolerant because it found every kind of person useful, and its members socially responsible because conscious of being needed.

Mechanized, it would have conquered nature but would recognize that conquest for what it is – not the abolition of necessity, but the transformation of much of the external causal necessity of matter into the internal logical necessity of moral decision.

The concept of normality would have disappeared, for, since an open society requires open individuals, maturity would be regarded as an ideal goal that is never reached. The aim of education would be to assist the child who is born as a closed system of reflex responses to grow up into an adult who is open to the degree to which he ceases to be merely accessory to his position and becomes aware of who he is and what he really wants. For we do not essentially change as we grow up; the difference between the child

and the adult is that the former is not conscious of his destiny and the latter is. His motto is that of the human beings in *Peer Gynt* – to thyself be true.

Far as we are and perhaps always must be from realizing this in our social life, in our cultural and intellectual life we have moved a long way toward it. Instead of working within the limits of one regional or national esthetic tradition, the modern artist works with a consciousness of all the cultural productions, not only of the whole world of his day, but also of the whole historical past. Thus one sculptor may be influenced by the forms of electrical machinery, another by African masks, another by Donatello and so on. The three greatest influences on my own work have been, I think, Dante, Langland, and Pope.

If we talk of tradition today, we no longer mean what the eighteenth century meant, a way of working handed down from one generation to the next; we mean a consciousness of the whole of the past in the present. Originality no longer means a slight personal modification of one's immediate predecessors, as for example the music of Haydn or Schubert differs from that of Mozart; it means the capacity to find in any other work of any date or locality clues for the treatment of one's own personal subject matter. Stravinsky and Picasso are good example of artists who at different times have made personal modifications of entirely different techniques.

Over against this cultural unity of time and space, however, stands the increasing uniqueness in modern life of the individual's social position. When I hear critics talk of an American art, I am at a loss to know which America they mean; the America of a Negro janitor in the Bronx is almost as different from the America of a prosperous white farmer in Wisconsin as France is from China.

The importance that criticism and belles-lettres take today can be understood only if we recognize these two characteristics of our society: the tendency toward individuation of experience, and the change in the meaning of the word tradition.

The contemporary critic has two primary tasks. Firstly he must show the individual that though he is unique he has also much in common with all other individuals, that each life is, to use a chemical metaphor, an isomorph

of a general human life and then must teach him how to see the relevance to his own experience of works of art which deal with experiences apparently strange to him; so that, for example, the coal miner in Pennsylvania can learn to see himself in terms of the world of Ronald Firbank, and an Anglican bishop find in *The Grapes of Wrath* a parable of his diocesan problems.

And secondly the critic must attempt to spread a knowledge of past cultures so that his audience may be as aware of them as the artist himself, not only simply in order to appreciate the latter, but because the situation of all individuals, artist and audience alike, in an open society is such that the only check on authoritarian control by the few, whether in matters of esthetic taste or political choice, is the knowledge of the many. We cannot of course all be experts in everything; we are always governed, and I hope willingly, by those whom we believe to be expert; but our society has already reached a point in its development where the expert can be recognized only by an educated judgment. The standard demanded of the man in the street (and outside our own special field, we are all men in the street) rises with every generation.

This cannot be emphasized too strongly. In earlier phases of social development a man could be a member of a group (i.e., not, in our sense, an individual), and yet be a person; he could be accessory to his position because the latter was a real necessity, and by virtue of being a necessity, could make him free. Today a man has only two choices: he can be consciously passive or consciously active. He can accept deliberately or reject deliberately, but he must decide because his position in life is no longer a real necessity; he could be different if he chose. The necessity that can make him free is no longer his position as such, but the necessity of choosing to accept or reject it. To be unconscious is to be neither an individual nor a person, but a mathematical integer in something called the Public which has no real existence.

This is, alas, what only too often happens. We have heard much in the last twenty years of the separation of the modern artist from the crowd, of how modern art is unintelligible to the average man, and it is commonly but falsely supposed that this is because the artist is a special case. In my

opinion, on the contrary, the lack of communication between artist and audience proves the lack of communication between all men; a work of art only unmasks the lack which is common to us all, but which we normally manage to gloss over with every trick and convention of conversation; men are now only individuals who can form collective masses but not communities.

One common reaction to this is to place responsibility for our defects upon fate, by saying that we are living in an age of transition, implying that if only we are patiently passive our faults will disappear of themselves when the new order has stabilized itself. This is a false and dangerous way of stating a valuable truth; perhaps the only decisive advantage we possess over our ancestors is a historical knowledge which enables us to see that all ages are ages of transition. This realization robs us of false hopes, of believing, if we are fortunate, that the Absolute Idea has been at last historically realized, or of expecting, if we are unfortunate, a millennium around the corner. At the same time it should keep us from despair; no error is final.

Whatever our nationality, occupation, or beliefs, we are all agreed on one thing; that the times through which we are now living mark the end of a period which, for convenience, we can say began with the Renaissance. We are all consciously or unconsciously seeking some form of catholic unity to correct the moral, artistic, and political chaos that has resulted from an over-development of protestant diversity (using these terms in their widest sense). Our differences, and they are vital, are as to the essential nature of that unity and the form which it should take. The cohesion of a society is secured by a mixture of three factors, community of actions, community of faith and beliefs, and coercion by those who possess the means of exercising it. In a differentiated society like our own, the first factor has in large measure disappeared. If we are agreed that the third should be as small an influence as possible, we must examine the second very carefully.

I have used two words, faith and belief, to describe two different forms of assent: assent to presuppositions which cannot be immediately proved true or false, as, for example, science presupposes that the world of nature exists; and assent to propositions that can be experimentally tested, e.g., the proposition that water boils at one hundred degrees centigrade.

In proportion as a society is closed and traditional it tends to regard all propositions as presuppositions and so to discourage initiative and research because it fears the destruction of its fundamental assumptions. Conversely, in proportion as a society becomes open and experimental it is in danger of denying the necessity of making any presuppositions at all. Further, in any society where there is a struggle for the power of control, the Ins will tend to preach a static monism which identifies the absolute and universal with their own concrete and particular, while the Outs, in exposing this ideological pretension, will tend toward a relative dualism which denies or ignores absolutes altogether. This is dangerous. The statement, "Man is a fallen creature with a natural bias to do evil," and the statement, "Men are good by nature and made bad by society," are both presuppositions, but it is not an academic question to which one we give assent. If, as I do, you assent to the first, your art and politics will be very different from what they will be if you assent, like Rousseau or Whitman, to the second.

The history of art and esthetic criticism is an excellent field for the study of these difficulties. In the first place, since the breakdown of patronage in the eighteenth century, the artist has been the extreme case of the free individual, the one for whom, more than for any other, society has become open and untraditional; and in the second place, since art by its nature is a shared, a catholic, activity, he is the first to feel the consequences of a lack of common beliefs, and the first to seek a common basis for human unity.

The Renaissance broke the subordination of all other intellectual fields to that of theology, and assumed the autonomy of each. The artists of the Renaissance sought canons of esthetic judgment which should be independent and self-supporting, and believed that they had found them in the classics, forgetting that the esthetics of the Greeks were inseparable from social habits and religious beliefs which they themselves did not share. The attempt to make esthetics an autonomous province resulted in academic esthetics, the substitution of the pedant for the priest.

The romantic reaction defied the pedant in the name of liberty for the imaginative original genius, but thereby only accentuated the two great esthetic problems, the problem of communication and the problem of value.

For the absolutely unique would be absolutely incommunicable; and unless, in some respects, all men are alike, that is, unoriginal, all taste is purely personal. Thus even the most romantic artists have attempted to justify their art by correspondence to a Nature which all can recognize.

Some assumed that the only point of agreement between individuals lay in the similarity of their sense perceptions and became “realists,” i.e., they attempted to give an exact description of phenomenal facts. Unfortunately, since the facts are infinite in number and their selection is not performed by the sense organs themselves, unless we assume more than this, such art must logically end in manufacturing nature herself; it will not be enough to paint a lake, one will have to make one.

Others turned to the unconscious and instinctive as a basis of unity and became “surrealists.” Unfortunately again, since one cannot create without becoming conscious of so doing, unless we assume more than this, such art must end in silent, unconscious telepathy.

Esthetics since the last war has therefore been forced to take seriously the problem of belief in art. Some, like Dr. I. A. Richards, have subordinated esthetics to psychology. A poem organizes our emotional attitudes; it is the efficiency of this organization, not the truth or falsehood of the belief expressed, that determines the esthetic value of the poem. In admitting that there is such a thing as a good poem or a bad poem, it demands an impersonal objective standard for judging the quality of the organization achieved. If I understand Dr. Richards rightly, this standard is to be found not in ethics or metaphysics or religion but in psychology. Now psychology, considered in isolation from other fields, is either a descriptive account of the result of introspection, or a practical science whose values are pragmatic; i.e., that is valuable which achieves most successfully a predetermined end. What is the end that Dr. Richards’ psychology assumes is given? I suspect that it is truth, righteousness and peace; I hope so. But suppose it is not? Then the psychological approach must end, as the Freudian psychology does, in making local, social, and historical conditions the criteria of normality against which every deviation is neurotic; art then becomes only a circuitous route to “Honor, power, glory and the love of women.” This either denies

any esthetic values at all, or makes the latter in direct proportion to popular appeal, and the appreciation of any art of another period impossible. This is to subordinate esthetics to politics and, though it may be the real view of the militant marxist, it is certainly not what Dr. Richards intends.

In seeking to account for the experience of all readers of poetry, that the metaphysical beliefs expressed in a poem are not solely decisive in our assessment of its value, he denies them any role at all. This is going too far. What he really establishes is the interdependence of belief and expression of belief, the Word and the Flesh, Faith and Works, that what we think cannot be isolated from what we say and do. False beliefs in fact lead to bad poetry, and bad poetry leads to a falsification of belief. Thus in his poem "Trees," a false esthetic has caused Joyce Kilmer to make statements which even from his own Catholic standpoint are heretical, while a false conception of human nature led Thomas Wolfe to write the grandiose rubbish he mistook for great prose.

Dr. Richards once said that *The Waste Land* marked the severance of poetry from all beliefs. This seems to me an inaccurate description. The poem is about the absence of belief and its very unpleasant consequences; it implies throughout a passionate belief in damnation: that to be without belief is to be lost. I cannot see how those who do not share this belief, those who think that truth is relative or pragmatic, can regard the poem as anything but an interesting case history of Mr. Eliot's neurotic state of mind.

The combination of this acceptance of all values as relative with the social conditions of a modern industrial society makes confusion worse confounded. The machine has destroyed tradition in the old sense and the refusal to replace it by absolute presuppositions deliberately chosen and consciously held is leading us to disaster. In the first place when tradition disappears so does popular taste; in saying that he can sell anything, the advertiser is admitting that there is no such thing as the taste of the man in the street: and in the second, the centralization of an industrial society places the dictatorship of taste in the hands of a very small group of people. If we are ever to achieve anything remotely resembling a democratic culture,

we must all begin by admitting the fact of this dictatorship, and the critics themselves must accept their responsibility and not mislead the public.

Let me take as an illustration of irresponsibility a review by a distinguished American critic. I choose this example because the critic who wrote it is more fortunate than most in not having to be a publisher's lackey and because though I have not read the novel I think that I should probably agree with his verdict.

"As one whose heart is coated, I fear, with a thick daubing of common clay, I see in *The Voyage* a beguiling romance and not a piece of profound symbolism. Though far less oracular and pretentious than Mr. Morgan's other novels, it is still fairly fancy for gross tastes like my own."

Why does he really find Mr. Morgan pretentious? Because his sensibility is too trained to be deceived. But this is not the reason he gives. He pretends he is just a plain man who can see through all that; in other words it is the untrained intellect and sensibility that alone can make sound critical judgments. This is irresponsible, for he knows as well as anyone that it is precisely the hearts daubed with clay and the gross taste that fall for the genteel and the bogusly spiritual. Certainly we are all common clay and should admit the fact – but with shame, not pride. What the critic ought to say is: "Remember that like you and everyone else I am a weak fallible creature who will often make false judgments; and therefore you must not take everything I say as gospel. I as a reviewer promise to do my best to overcome my natural laziness and wooly-mindedness, and you who read me must try to do the same."

This would be a beginning, but a great deal more should be expected. Not only should the critic realize the necessity of coordinating his esthetic values with values in all other spheres of life, but he has a duty in a democracy to tell the public what they are. If I am to trust a reviewer's judgment upon a book I have not read, I want to know among other things his philosophical beliefs. If I find, for instance, that he believes in automatic progress I shall no more trust him than I would trust a philosopher who liked Brahms or Shelley.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the State or anyone else should decree an orthodoxy to which all critics must conform or forever hold their peace, but only that, since life does not exist in a series of autonomous departments, esthetic values do not nourish themselves, and that the critic who does not realize this will be a bad critic who misleads the public and at best can only be right on occasions by luck.

Earlier in this lecture I suggested that democracy and fascism are disagreed, not on the need for cultural unity, but on its nature and form. I would summarize these differences thus.

- Social Democracy

1. We cannot live without believing certain values to be absolute. These values exist, though our knowledge of them is imperfect, distorted by the limitations of our historical position and our personal character. However, if but only if we realize this, our knowledge can improve.
2. Because the existence of absolutes implies the unity of truth, the truths arrived at in different fields cannot ultimately conflict. All the arts and sciences must therefore be assumed to be of equal value, isomorphs of one common cooperative task, and no one of these must be subordinated to another.
3. Man is not, as the romantics imagine, good by nature. Men are equal not in their capacities and virtues but in their natural bias towards evil. No individual or class, therefore, however superior in intellect or character to the rest, can claim an absolute right to impose its view of the good upon them. Government must be democratic, the people must have a right to make their own mistakes and to suffer for them, because no one is free from error.
4. To deny to those who are in fact the elite of their age the right to impose their authority by force, does not deny their obligation to educate and persuade. Responsibility is in direct proportion to capacity.

- Fascism

1. The masses cannot live without believing certain values to be absolute. Such values, however, do not exist; therefore the state must coerce the masses into accepting as absolute what in fact are myths. The choice of myth is dictated by its pragmatic value as conceived by the leaders of the state.
2. Because the nonexistence of absolutes implies the relativity of truth, the truths arrived at in different fields must ultimately conflict. Unity and stability can therefore only be achieved under social pressure. Since it is the politician who commands the means of pressure, all the other arts and sciences must be subordinated to the political.
3. All men are not as the romantics imagined good by nature, nor are they equal. Further, since the political field is the determining one and the first element of political goodness is the capacity to exercise power, that capacity takes precedence over all others in defining the Good. The majority are bad, but a few are good and have therefore a right to direct the rest. Government must be authoritarian; the people must be protected from the consequences of their own mistakes by those who cannot err.
4. The power to exercise authority implies the obligation to do so.

If we accept the democratic assumptions what consequences will follow in the field of criticism?

1. The critic who assumes that absolute values exist but that our knowledge of them is always imperfect will judge a work of art by the degree to which it transcends the artist's personal and historical limitations, but he will not expect such transcendence ever to be complete, either in the artist or himself. He will equip himself with social and historical knowledge in order to overcome his own prejudices and to help the reader to see, through all the apparent differences in the technique and subject matter of great works, their underlying unity. He will be suspicious of all that is partisan,

naturalistic, and personal, and of all such antitheses as Traditional versus Modern.

2. Assuming the unity of truth he will realize the interdependence of ethics, politics, science, esthetics, etc. and do his best to acquire as all-round a culture as possible. Assuming the equal value of these fields, he will in judging a book attempt to keep them all in mind without being dominated by any one of them. He will try to avoid, for example, both the puritanical attitude of the bourgeois censor of morals and the nihilist attitude of the bohemian who ignores or denies the effect of moral values upon works of art and the moral influence which they do in fact exert. Slogans like Art for Art's Sake or Art for Politics' Sake will be equally objectionable to him.

3. Admitting original sin, he will not believe in his own infallibility, or cause others to believe in it. He will be as chary of utterly condemning a book as of acclaiming it a masterpiece. He will flatter neither the masses by assuring them that what is popular must be good nor the highbrow by assuring them that what is avantgarde must be superior. Further he will conceive of art, like life, as being a self-discipline rather than a self-expression. Like Henry James he will regard "Clumsy life at her stupid work" as something to be mastered and controlled. He will see artistic freedom and personality as dependent upon the voluntary acceptance of limitations, which alone are strong enough to test the genuine intensity of the original creative impulse; he will distrust the formless, the expansive, the unfinished, and the casual.

4. Accepting his responsibility, he will see his position of influence as an accident, an inheritance which he does not deserve and which he is incompetent to administer. For though it is absolutely required of a man that he should intend to help others, the power to do so is outside his control. No man can guarantee the effect upon others of the acts he does with the intention of helping them. Indeed all he knows for certain is that, since his actions are never perfect, he must always do others harm, so that the final aim of every critic and teacher must be to persuade others to do without him, to realize that the gifts of the spirit are never to be had at second hand.

Thus no critic or teacher must deceive himself or others by pretending that he criticizes for their sake; he has no right either to criticize or teach unless he can say: "I do this, whatever its effects, because I cannot help doing it."

In the last analysis every act of critical judgment, like every other act in life, like life itself, rests on a decision, a wager which is irrevocable and in a sense absurd. But unless we have the courage and faith to take such decisions with full recognition of their arbitrary and conditional character, nothing can save us, individually or collectively, now or at any other time, from a dictatorship which we shall regret. Dictatorship has been defined as a state where everything that is not obligatory is forbidden, and in that sense man has always lived under a dictatorship and always will. Our only choice lies between an external and false necessity passively accepted and an internal necessity consciously decided, but that is the difference between slavery and freedom.