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THE PRACTICAL CRITIC: A PERSONAL VIEW

The invitation to give this lecture is the most gratifying one I've ever received, for at this very moment one of my longer-standing fantasies is being fulfilled. The fantasy began during one of the four afternoons I sat in Rackham—my short stories once again having gone down to defeat—and consoled myself with the thought that someday I would show them. Someday, the Hopwood Committee would be saying among themselves, "My God, how could Solotaroff have written those tremendous novels and not have won even a minor award in fiction when he was here?" And so, to make amends, I would be invited to give the Hopwood Lecture, and back I would come to Ann Arbor in modest triumph, my suitcase full of crow. Well, it didn't quite work out like that. But here I am anyway. Though I'm about ten years behind the timetable I'd set and have made the journey not along the high road of fiction but the low one of literary journalism, my vanity is well content and advises me not to quibble.

In the Hopwood Lecture that I would compose during those years after leaving Ann Arbor, and living in Greenwich Village and other lonely places, I would always find time to say a few words in consolation to my fellow losers who would be sitting in the audience. In fact, as those years dragged on and the Hopwood judges were joined by a lengthening line of magazine editors, my fellow losers became exceedingly real to me: more real than I was to myself, since in my fantasy lecture I was transformed into a winner, a state that was very pleasant but not very real. By the same token, my tremendous novels still being unwritten, my only basis for being there in my fantasy as a writer was my growing pile of rejection slips. So my thoughts turned easily to the sweet uses of adversity and to those who most needed to be reminded of them.

All of which, of course, was a bit crazy: a kind of vain (in both senses of the word) and glum effort to rise above the mire of rejection. "Fame is the spur," as Milton said, but still one needs a horse: otherwise there's not much to kick but yourself. There was lots of future glory for me in writing fiction but not much present substance or energy, for reasons which I've already written about* and will spare you this evening. Instead, I'd like to talk a bit about why I went into literary journalism, or practical criticism, why it provided me with a horse of sorts, or, to put it less metaphorically, a positive motive for writing. Perhaps you plan to stay away

from criticism like the plague, in which case you may want to set your mind for forty-five minutes from now, when I finally get out of the way of the awards, and drift off into composing your own future Hopwood lecture. But perhaps I may say something, sooner or later, that applies to your situation too, for all forms of writing share a certain identity as physical and metaphysical labor: like this lecture, each is a bridge of words being led across an abyss of doubt.

One of the courses I took at Michigan was called "Practical Criticism." I think I was a junior at the time, and know that I was full of new-fangled complexities, a kind of New Critic in-training, an ingenious reader between the lines, where all of the ironies and paradoxes and symbols were hidden from common view. Reading between the lines also meant between one's actual gut responses, but armed with the magical lamp of ambiguity one forged on into the darkness. I'm not putting down the New Criticism, which has become kind of a mug's game—the standard form of parricide among critics of my generation—I'm merely saying that it was the way I found to be pretentious, of which each generation has its own modes. Ten years before, I would no doubt have come on like a Marxist, twenty years later, perhaps, as a wild and wooly trasher of literature, or a stoned farmer, or a media freak, or all rolled into one. Anyway, I took this course in Practical Criticism because I was getting out of my depth and not a little screwed up. A few months before, I'd been asked to write a review for the Michigan Daily, of a collection of stories by William Carlos Williams. I had given it the big treatment, as though Williams was sort of like Borges (he was really like an American Chekhov—all eyes and heart), and the review was rejected. Very put out, I took it to my friend Herbert Barrows, who read it and said he felt like he had been hanging by his suspenders for two minutes. So since he was teaching Practical Criticism I decided to take it.

It was a swell course, or rather, class, or better, group: that is to say, a course that became a kind of little community that assembled three hours a week so that we could all learn from each other. At first, Herbert would read us a story or poem, and we would jot down what struck us as significant. The first few times I was left at the post in a kind of panic. I could barely make out the lines on one reading: how was I supposed to read between them? This, of course, was the point of the exercise, which had to do not with ingenuity but with a kind of primary responsiveness, known as paying attention, and with letting a central impression grow inside you, and with articulating it.

Clearly, I had a lot to learn, beginning with the distinction between having an impression and making one. The pretender critic (same root as pretentious) in myself didn't have impressions: that was to be impressionistic, which was the last thing a New Critic could afford to be in his pursuit of order and complexity. But someone with my name had better begin to have some impressions, I realized, if he was to stop handing in this desperate gibberish.

As I said, I had a lot of help from our group. I remember one student in particular who almost regularly came up with an amazingly sharp and interesting response. He seemed older than most of us, and was very quiet, and wore a hearing aid, which I thought might be really a secret miniature tape recorder by which he would play back to himself what the rest of us had heard only once and were stumbling to remember. But, as I began to see, his secret advantage lay elsewhere. Instead of groping about to describe and judge the poem or story: "This poem is about X;
what I liked about it was Y," and so forth, he would find an image which, as he
deftly developed it, characterized the work and stated its appeal in such a way that it
came back from his mind as freshly and distinctively as it had entered. I remember
his speaking of a poem by Frost or Lawrence as being like a patch of ocean where
two mighty warships had fought and gone down, leaving a single empty lifeboat
floating on the surface. So I began to see that practical criticism was not only trust­
ing your own impressions but also using your imagination to take the measure of a
work and to locate it in the world of experience.

All of which, as time went on, was like being let off a leash, one’s mind running
free among its natural interests and with its natural energy. Or, to put it another
way, by making criticism practical, Herbert brought it level with one’s taste and
experience rather than setting it on a higher, more abstract plane. Or, to put it a
third way, he brought literature back to the reasons I’d had for being interested in it
in the first place. The course didn’t make me into a practical critic or even make me
desire to become one, but it did help to straighten me out a bit and planted certain
seeds that were to crop up later.

My second encounter with practical criticism came about six years later and also
took place in a classroom. By then I had pretty well given up writing fiction, was
now a graduate student at the University of Chicago and had just begun to teach
composition and a literature course at a two-year college called Indiana University
Calumet Center. It was located in East Chicago, Indiana, which was known as “The
Workbench of America,” and most of my students worked in local oil refineries
and steel mills. The Center was one grim brick building just off Route 12, a major
trucking route, and as the diesels roared by outside, we talked about comma faults
and dangling modifiers and other “Gross Illiteracies,” and about such immediately
relevant writers as Homer, Plato, Dante, and Chaucer.

For a time, we were miles apart. I with my sense of being in an academic slum,
my Flaubertian notion of style and my Aristotelean approach to structure, which I
was learning at Chicago and, faute de mieux, teaching at East Chicago; my students,
half-awake after eight hours of tending an open hearth furnace or a catalyst cracker
and otherwise puzzled, intimidated, or hunched defensively in their leather jackets,
staring at their copy of The Agamemnon as though it were still in the original
Greek. I struggled and groped, cajoled and bitched; none of it did much good.

In one of my composition courses was a boy named John Dovitch. Dovitch was
from Calumet City, another garden spot, whose main industry was vice, and he
looked like he had grown up on the street corners there: the DA haircut, the motor­
cycle boots, the swagger. He was small and tough and smart as a whip. He liked to
sit in the front and give me the fish-eye, and every so often he would contribute to
the discussion:

“What’s the matter with repeating a word?”
“It makes your writing monotonous.”
“But that other word was two sentences back.”
“Well, it’s still not good style.”
“Who says so? I mean besides you?”
“It’s not a question of who says so. It’s a question of varying your word choice, of
finding the precise word.”
“I read a story by this guy Hemingway and he repeats himself all the time.”
"That's different... He does it for an effect."
"Yeah... so?"

And so on and so forth. Dovitch's next theme was sure to be full of repetitions, just as it was sure to be full of comma faults and dangling modifiers and misspellings—taunting me. The only problem was that he could write. He wrote a composition on the gang he'd belonged to that could have been written by Nelson Algren. I didn't know what to do, so I gave him an A for content and a D— for mechanics. He came up to see me after class.

"You want to know about your grade," I said, steeling myself.
"It's pretty screwy, but what I want to know is where you're from."
"Chicago."
"Yeah, I know that. You're one of those graduate students. I mean where did you grow up?"
"Elizabeth, New Jersey."
"That's sort of like around here."
"That's right," I said, "lots of refineries."
"Then why do you talk like you grew up at Harvard?"

I took that one home with me. After a good deal of brooding, I decided that he was telling me to wise up. To realize where I was. Why the airs and graces? Mainly because I was so wrapped up in teaching composition and literature as though I were selling Omega watches at Woolworth's that I hadn't realized that I was teaching persons. And meanwhile there was a whole side of me that knew these persons, had gone to high school with them, buddied with them in the Navy, worked with them in restaurants. And clearly the burden of relating to them was on me, and so was the burden of interest. They were rightly interested in their accounting or lab courses, for through them they might someday have jobs that wouldn't break their backs. But what did using precise transition words or understanding the tragic form have to do for them? What had they to do for me when I had started college, only a little less in the dark than they were, and also bent on moving up in the world?

I make this sound like a moment of truth, but the realities of teaching in East Chicago dawned on me in stages, as I settled into the work and began to see my way, which was to make use of the common ground between us and to make it pertain. Instead of teaching grammar, say, as rules and regulations, I tried to teach it as thought, a kind of rock-bottom logic. We tried to imagine what the dawn of language was like and how a grammar came into being as a way of sorting out chaos of phenomena. Instead of teaching the dicta of correct usage, we played around with etymologies, giving words their weight and color as artifacts, placing them in the affairs of men. In the literature course, we compared Odysseus with Davy Crockett, a big pop-cult hero at the time, to figure out what an epic hero was. We put together a modern scenario of Agamemnon with Douglas MacArthur as the tragic hero. We tried to imagine why Socrates wasn't just a sucker to stay in prison and get executed and why even the laws in East Chicago had something to be said for them. But this puts the experience too pedagogically. Much of the time, I simply plunged in, letting a line of inquiry develop of its own course. I free associated and improvised, stimulated mainly by those faces in front of me that I wanted to amuse and involve, to wipe the film of dullness away from their eyes. And of course I was stimulated
myself by all that I was learning by going back to the fundamentals and letting them fill with useful content.

What did all of this have to do with practical criticism? A good deal as I was subsequently to find out. For one thing, I had begun to learn what an audience was: a group of people who were waiting to be interested, which was within their right. I had also begun to learn what the terms of the appeal were: that one addressed them as a man among men rather than as a highly literary type who had just parachuted in from graduate school. I was also learning that the main problem and opportunity was to be clear: to approach the unfamiliar by means of the familiar, the abstract by the concrete, the concept by means of the example. I was also learning something about tone: the right one coming from the natural play of individuality, the wrong one from role-playing. Finally, I was beginning to learn that to make matters interesting you had to first make them interesting to yourself. That was where imagination came in: seeing something in another way. As a corollary of this, I was beginning to understand that the truly interesting was likely to have an element of risk in it.

Obviously, I didn’t reach all of these students, and I learned from that too. I remember one exam in which I asked which was the more tragic play: Agamemnon or Oedipus. Back came my definitions, distinctions, and examples in more or less garbled form. One student told me that the play about the general was more tragic because he was like MacArthur getting bumped off during the San Francisco Parade in '54, which was very unusual, but the other play by Socrates wasn’t very tragic because for someone to kill his father and marry his mother, that happens all the time. So there was no common denominator: you tried to keep a vision of the best possibilities in the class—or audience—and address them. This would also come in handy later.

Meanwhile, there was Dovitch, who turned up the next fall in the second half of the literature course. A little less daunting but still up in the front seat, his skepticism still intact. To what did I owe this privilege of teaching him again, I asked. He told me that I fitted into his schedule. So we went round and round again until one day he stayed behind after class.

“You’ve gotten a little smarter,” he said.
“Thank you,” I said, "maybe I have."
"Yeah, you said some interesting things now and then."
"Maybe you’re getting smarter too."
He shrugged, summoning his truculence.
"It takes two to communicate," I said.

Or something like that. Anyway, from then on the tension between us diminished; we continued to play each other tough but there was a rapport that kept each of us from his form of crapping around. By the time we got to the last two novels, Crime and Punishment and Huckleberry Finn, I was much more interested in discovering how their two renegades established themselves in his mind than in imposing my own analogies and structure. Once I knew what was reaching him, what was charged for him, we could try to figure out the circuits. I had been trained to work the other way around: find the form and you’ll find the power. It was a much tidier way of teaching; there is nothing like the word “structure” to cool out a class. But it
was more interesting to teach an alert class, beginning with myself.

The next semester I passed Dovitch on to a friend who was teaching the sophomore literature course. By the end of the year, Dovitch had won a scholarship to Illinois and another to Southern Illinois. He decided to go to Carbondale. "I'd be lost with all those fraternity guys at Champaign," he told me. "I mean, I don't have the right clothes, or table manners." I said that Illinois probably wasn't all fraternities. "Nah, I'm better off with the other hunkies."

Meanwhile, I was still a Ph.D. candidate at Chicago, which was a very different thing from teaching at East Chicago. The main task seemed to be to depersonalize your mind, to sound like a scholar, to write prose that was mostly dull factuality and timidity, as reserved as a corpse or, to quote myself: "I have chosen to continue my discussion of Thoreau's theory of poetry to its more practicable aspects: that is, to the ideas and opinions that appear to bear directly upon what Thoreau presumably wanted to achieve when he sat down to write a poem."

One of the last courses I took was in Contemporary Criticism. It was taught by Norman Maclean, the stylist of the Chicago Critics, a man with a passion for Hemingway as well as Aristotle. There was a five-minute quiz each week; the first was on Croce's Esthetics: "What does Croce mean by an 'intuition'?"

So, following my practice of giving them what I thought they wanted to hear, and aping Croce as much as possible, I scribbled down something like, "An intuition, in the Crocean view, partakes of the relational aspect of consciousness..." and continued on in that vein.

The next class meeting, Maclean read a few of the answers.

"'An intuition is a perception,' " he began and stopped. "That's good," he said. "Right to the point. She puts up a clothesline she can hang the washing on. Listen..." and he read it to the end.

"Now, I want to read another. 'An intuition, in the Crocean view, ...'" He read a few more of my sentences and stopped. "I'm sorry," he said. "I love the English language too much to read this kind of hokum." After a despairing pause, he went on. "Why does a young person want to write like a broken-down philosophy professor in a third-rate teacher's college?"

I didn't know whether to be angry or crestfallen. After all, Croce didn't sound so different. I'd even gotten that "partake" expression from him or his translator. As I was leaving class, Maclean caught my eye and I walked over to him.

"You seem pretty bright," he said, "when you talk in class. But if you don't learn to write clearly by the end of this course, I'm going to flunk you."

It hurt but it was what I needed to be told. Under Maclean's goading and encouragement, and especially under the influence of his teaching that went to the center of a subject like an arrow ("Eliot's criticism is that of a lyric poet, the two main issues being a writer's sensibility and style"), I labored to write as accurately and cleanly as possible. I thought of it as "coming clean," and "going straight," expressions that suggested the true nature of my project. How difficult it was to cut out the crap. And what a relief. For the first time in my life, I found myself writing for someone—a good voice in my head that drew out my better nature and gave it backing. So Chicago and East Chicago began to come together, two tasks connected by a common aspiration.
Two years passed. One summer morning I was sitting in the office I used at the University of Chicago where I had been teaching and was now finishing up my thesis and getting ready to move on. A young man strolled into the room. He was wearing a nice suit and a rep tie and smiling broadly, and it took me a few seconds to recognize him. It was Dovitch. We chatted for a while about what we had been doing and then he told me why he had looked me up. "I'm going to graduate school," he said.

"You don't say."

"Yeah. I'm going to be an English teacher."

As it turned out, my own teaching career ended a few weeks later when I was offered a job at Commentary. So I went to New York and became an editor and a literary journalist. I still had a lot to learn but thanks to Dovitch and Maclean, I pretty well knew what my purpose was.

The way I still see it, eleven years later, is that a great many Americans are in a peculiar bind. They've grown up in homes, and communities, and schools which provide little intellectual nourishment and go off to college, mainly because that's where one goes if he can. And there with practically no preparation or basis—except possibly in math and science—they study the liberal arts. And if they are bright and fortunate, sooner or later, they are turned on to one another of these arts, and like Plato's slaves, are led from the cave into the light. And like them are led back again. For once they graduate and go off to Middle America, the mass society and the mass culture take over again, and the deprivations resume, all the more sharply for being made conscious. Or to put it another way, education in America tends to be a brief, discontinuous or else solitary activity.

All of which is perhaps a Fifties view. There's now the counter-culture. But I wonder where most of its members will be five years from now and how much "greening" they will be achieving. And it may be that my view of college education is also from the Fifties. But I wonder if the tremendous demands that students make today on the institution aren't generated partly, at least, by the recognition that these four or five years must be made vital to their lives, for there's not much else in the society that has been or will be.

Be that as it may, it's how I see my work as a practical critic: the opportunity to teach literature in the public forum. This is not the way I would have viewed it if I had taken up criticism twenty years ago. I would have dismissed the reading public as hopelessly shallow and vulgar and tried to write for the Happy Few who subscribed to Partisan Review. But having followed the road I have, the notion of fostering an avant-garde has come to seem rather precious and beside the point. (If there is an Avant-Garde. What I tend to see is a lot of writers, in Richard Howard's phrase, "alone in America.")

I have spoken a lot about the transaction that the practical critic makes with an audience and said almost nothing about his transaction with the books and authors he writes about. Obviously, the claims of the audience are general and those of the writer are specific and pressing, and most of the time one is too embattled with the problems of trying to characterize him justly to worry about how all of these uncertainties and approximations of judgment will be taken. A good review, it seems to me, does three things—it describes a book, judges it, and identifies a context, the
place it may occupy in contemporary consciousness. I used to think that the last was more crucial than I do now: i.e. gauging the book's relevance to the general reader. Mostly that can be left to him to figure out, once the writer and the book are placed against the ground of one's own interest in them. The rest is often just sniffing the Zeitgeist, which grows wearisome to everyone and deflects attention from the task, which hasn't changed since Matthew Arnold defined it, as seeing the object as it truly is.

But if your primary obligation as a practical critic is to the writer and his work, he is not the audience you write for. You aren't there to cheer him up or put him down or set him straight. You're there to listen and respond and to develop your image of the book, the actual impressions it has made on you into a description and an inquiry; that is to say, a learning process of your own. Unless you're learning something yourself as you write, the chances are that you are merely going through the motions of literary journalism and plodding along one of the ruts in your mind. That is why it is best to risk a line of inquiry that starts in uncertainties rather than assurances, to go off the deep end rather than the shallow. The main thing is to be clear, but an easily won clarity is likely to be superficial.

So you yourself make up the beginning of your audience. But unless you get a great deal of satisfaction out of talking to yourself, you need others—not many, a few good faces and voices will do. By now, the face I see is of no one I know. He belongs to my generation and has come to ideas the hard way and on his own; he is in this society but not quite of it, his face being sensitive as well as practical; he likes books but is not, strictly speaking, literary. He is keenly conscious of the "scrimmage of appetites" in America, and he is stimulated by alternative possibilities. He is fundamentally straight and positive, is put off by posturing, malice, and bad faith. Several people I've mentioned have contributed to this composite, and I've also encountered him as an apple grower, a psychoanalyst, a novelist, and as the head of a steel construction company. He keeps me company as a practical critic and keeps me going.

(The Hopwood Lecture at the University of Michigan, 1971.)