

1962

Literary Criticism

Harry A. Salis
St. John Fisher College

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/angle>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Salis, Harry A. (1962) "Literary Criticism," *The Angle*: Vol. 1962: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/angle/vol1962/iss1/9>

This document is posted at <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/angle/vol1962/iss1/9> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

Literary Criticism

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The literary review should be and has been one of the more stimulating and invigorating institutions of literary endeavor. Today the book review has fallen from a position of prominent activity to an amazingly low state of morbid drowsiness. The literary critic vies with his colleagues in bestowing the stamp of approval on as many new books as is humanly possible. The influential book sections of the New York papers now represent a veritable monument to lethargy. The book reviews of at least one national weekly magazine are written with amusement of the readers in mind, without the least intention of educating them or guiding them in the selection of their reading materials. Doris Grumbach analysed this question in the August 13, 1960, issue of *America*. In asserting her thesis, Mrs. Grumbach cited a book review which had appeared in the *New York Times*. It was a discussion by Aubrey Menon of John Berry's *Krishna Fluting*. Despite the reviewer's exposure of the ridiculousness of the novel and the poverty of the author's thought, the book received a passing mark from the more amiable majority of critics. It is worth quoting here, because of its singular merit. (Mrs. Grumbach found it the only worthwhile review in the entire year) and because of its apparent lack of effect upon the public."

Cover Page Footnote

Appeared in the issue: Volume 7, Spring, 1962.

Literary Criticism

HARRY A. SALIS

The literary review should be and has been one of the more stimulating and invigorating institutions of literary endeavor. Today the book review has fallen from a position of prominent activity to an amazingly low state of morbid drowsiness. The literary critic vies with his colleagues in bestowing the stamp of approval on as many new books as is humanly possible. The influential book sections of the New York papers now represent a veritable monument to lethargy. The book reviews of at least one national weekly magazine are written with amusement of the readers in mind, without the least intention of educating them or guiding them in the selection of their reading materials. Doris Grumbach analysed this question in the August 13, 1960, issue of *America*. In asserting her thesis, Mrs. Grumbach cited a book review which had appeared in the *New York Times*. It was a discussion by Aubrey Menon of John Berry's *Krishna Fluting*. Despite the reviewer's exposure of the ridiculousness of the novel and the poverty of the author's thought, the book received a passing mark from the more amiable majority of critics. It is worth quoting here, because of its singular merit. (Mrs. Grumbach found it the only worthwhile review in the entire year) and because of its apparent lack of effect upon the public.

The principle character is a young man who is half Pennsylvania Quaker and half Hindu. He is a poet. He is writing an epic. He has, says Mr. Berry, "virile hair on his toes." He is -- naturally -- very amorous and early in the story he makes advances to a local woman "by sitting on her legs and leaning back on her as if she were a mat." He is not always so delicate. A little further on we find that "from head to foot he pounded her with a sandal, weeping at the violence he was doing to them both." (That is, the lady and himself, not I believe, the lady and the sandal, though it might be, since Mr. Berry is fond of symbolic passages.) He is a man of strong but complex emotions. Looking at himself in a mirror, he "poured whiskey and drank it neat, shuddering; then half a tumbler, not shuddering." "The fact is," writes Mr. Berry, "that he found himself infinitely attractive."

The public's reception of this unusual novel can be summed up by the fact that it received a National Book Award. The state of affairs here is really very simple: few noteworthy book reviews are being written at this time and, when they are, they are without impact, for the public fails to take them seriously. This lack of public

response results directly from a lack of exposure to quality. Without such exposure, it is virtually impossible to recognize a truly momentous piece of criticism.

The tragic element here is that the reviewer has an obligation to discern the true works of the literary art. It is he who must distinguish between the commonplace and the consequential. Failing to rise to the occasion, the critic promotes the influence of mediocrity and discourages the extension of genuinely original and creative activity.

It should be remembered that the review is a literary work in itself. Literature has a purpose and a message and the review must examine the former and comprehend the latter. The application of sound literary principles is the basic component of a good review. The reviewer must speak on aesthetic taste and cite instances of intrinsic value. The definition of standards and goals stressed by the reviewer would, *per se*, act as a stimulus for further achievement. The more ambitious would, as a result, be invited to respond and the indifferent would be prodded to react. Clearly such a result would be most welcome, if the reviewer offers constructive criticism rather than destructive approval. And even among books whose import is mainly spiritual and religious, the sentimental and hackneyed must be condemned and the animated and refreshing must be given welcome recognition. Books of true spiritual import could easily be discerned from the repetitious and sentimental folly which is often encountered today. One must never lose sight of the fact that good intentions do not always give birth to a work of quality; moreover, good intentions are never effective unless they are clearly and correctly expressed.

The criteria of criticism are three: 1) what does the

author say? 2) does he say it well? 3) was it worth saying? By answering these simple questions, a fair and competent appreciation of any work of literature can be obtained, provided, of course, there exists in the reviewer some degree of ability and insight. Once the theme or idea has been isolated, style and content can more readily be discussed. Unfortunately, however, the formidable array of literary critics presently prefer (with but all too rare exceptions) to display little concern for what is indicated or proposed in a book. As this important factor is relegated to a status of little regard, so too is the author's method of propagating his ideas given but superficial comment. This is perhaps the most disturbing habit of our modern school of criticism: the blind acceptance of the idea with little or no serious thought given to it. The philosophy of the author is easily approved by the indifferent reviewer without hesitation (indeed, without recognition). "The pen is mightier than the sword," and in this day and age, how true! It is almost impossible to conceive how often political institutions have been weakened, religious belief shaken, and morality rejected as the result of subtle though truthless insinuations in otherwise innocent writings. It need only be mentioned in passing that a recent work narrating the fortunes (and subsequent misfortunes) of a certain recent European dictatorship is a good example of this dubious technique. Gross manipulation of the facts and cleverly worded, sometimes anti-clerical, phrases give historical facts new meaning. It goes without saying that the reviewers dutifully gave the book wide acclaim and now, what with the declaration of the "experts" proclaiming it the definitive volume on the subject, it has become a best-seller of 1961 and the choice of several book clubs. Only two reviews of any importance have exposed the underlying meaning of the book -- and these

appeared in publications of limited circulation. This interest and the diligence of the reviewer must detect what is misleading; the refinement and qualifications of the reviewer's judgment must note what is insignificant, for a continuous diet of nothingness can be as devastating as the most brilliant and outspoken attack.

Thus the inferences of literary criticism are far reaching. The critic, in literature as well as in art and music, is responsible for the "fashions" of the day. The future developments of the literary art are, quite conceivably, dependent upon an invigorating examination of present output. And as the principles of the individual are frequently formed by the matter he reads, those books which pass the reviewer with his approval must of necessity be worthwhile and advantageous. (If literary tastes of this country were raised somewhat, and the practices of the reviewer raised considerably, would not the book review constitute an accepted and authoritative method of "censorship," eliminating *voluntarily* that which offends public decency?)

An independence from compromising associations which tend to influence the reviewer in his work is necessary for the purely objective investigation of any piece of literature, though being independent is not synonymous with being unprincipled.

literature, though being independent is *not* synonymous with being unprincipled. Until this "neutral" state is adhered to by the critic, no amount of native ability or literary sensitivity will produce a good review. And what is of greater consequence is that until good reviews are fre-

quently written and widely read, the literary world will suffer from a serious impairment, making it impossible to exert any outside force to improve literary output.

Therefore, at present we suffer from an ever-increasing wave of literary thought which is without reflection and without substance. The only solution appears to be the discovery by the reviewer of himself and the eventual awakening in the critic of a much belated sense of duty.