

# Wanted—Critics

John Berger

"MORON!" "Vermin!" "Abortion!" "Morpian!" "Sewer Rat!" "Curate!" "Cretin!" "Cr-ritic!" "Oh!"

Thus, Vladimir and Estragon in a slanging match whilst waiting for Godot. The coup de grace is the accusation of being a critic; it is worse than all that preceded it.

When I was practising as a critic I was sometimes conscious of the half-truth of this view: now perhaps I am more conscious of the other half of the truth: Gide's remark somewhere that criticism is the spirit of creation.

What, however, I would like to do in this article is to encourage young socialists to become critics and, since it is the subject I inevitably feel most keenly about, particularly art critics. I do not recommend art criticism as a life-long profession. All criticism has in it for the critic an element of claustrophobia and in the long run this can prove **fatal**. What I recommend is a bout of five or so years of criticism—and the image of a bout is not carelessly chosen. And what I should like to see the art section of this journal do is to publish, encourage and discover new critics.

Art criticism at least in this country barely exists today which is why the tramps' charge has some justice in it. Gossip predominates. Gossip being talk which is self-enclosing, based on rumours and guesses, wishfully subjective, and fundamentally ignorant. There may be a certain inevitable antagonism between the thinking of artist and critic. The artist, in relation to any particular one of his works, must always be single-minded; the critic must be open-minded to the maximum. The artist judges himself by how nearly he achieves his aim: the critic judges the artist by what he has actually done. The artist says, as it were, I am ten miles from London: the critic says you have travelled 40 miles from Oxford. But, despite this necessary difference of approach, there is no reason why artists should not respect a critic whose knowledge and devotion to their art is clearly apparent. The chief reason why artists suspect critics is that they have arbitrary power which they use irresponsibly. If I may be autobiographical for one moment: when I was writing regular criticism my writing may have suffered from many faults, but I did establish week after week the standards by which I criticised: I was not entirely arbitrary and, as a result of this, I found that even painters, whom I had attacked severely, were prepared to argue and discuss with me on a minimum basis of mutual respect.

## Abdicating critical standards

Let me give an example or two of arbitrariness, of the total lack of thought, in current criticism. I do this, not to single out ex-colleagues for personal attack, but to prove my statement that art criticism barely exists today because the arts have been turned into a no-man's land of irrationalism and frightened intellectual time-serving.

The *Observer* critic recently wrote about Francis Bacon. After three paragraphs implying that Bacon's considerable

influence and success were justified, he states—as a final summing up—that Bacon's "essential quality . . . remains as elusive as a nightmare." Critically, this means nothing. One might as well say X's paintings are as white as snow, or Y's are as quiet as a graveyard. The attitude behind such criticism is this: Francis Bacon's paintings exist, and therefore the function of the critic is simply to describe, within the limits of his own perception, *how* they exist. Not *why*, and with *what* justification and with what human human and moral effect, but just *how*. Such an attitude would have just something to be said for it, if it were comprehensive, if the critic could simply describe everything that was created. But of course he cannot. He must select. And since he has no standards he chooses to write about either what happens to be fashionable, or about what touches his often kind heart. That is where the arbitrariness comes in.

## Some unquestioned assumptions

And here is an example of a different kind of non-criticism from the *New Statesman*.

"Bryan Wynter's latest paintings show him experimenting with the techniques of action painting and tachisme." Do you know what those techniques are? Well, if you don't you shouldn't be reading art-criticism. Art like chess is a specialised activity. You can even earn your living teaching people to play it. In fact I shouldn't be reading art-criticism either because I thought action painting and tachisme were the same thing. "In the process he has come up with a personal style of his own, and has found himself as a first-rate decorative artist." I know a man who has a very personal style for throwing darts—underhand. But he is not a very good player. And what is a first-rate decorative artist? A house-painter? (he often is); or, say, Veronese? And, if Veronese, isn't his "decorativeness" something to do with his delight in his subject matter—with his full-breasted women, his pearls, and his great platters of voluptuous fruit? And so how does an abstract artist become decorative in that same sense? Maybe he can. But I want to know how. I want unquestioned assumptions answered by the critic. "Mr. Wynter covers his large, upright canvases with a few bold forms, spontaneously applied, and then overlays them with intricate patterns. This process is repeated several times in a single painting so that the final effort is rich and elaborate, although Mr. Wynter generally manages to retain a quality of freshness and immediacy." This sounds like instructions about how to do an early morning exercise. "Fling them back boldly! Circle them, naturally, spontaneously. And then bit by bit let those fingers beat their little intricate beat. That's it! The more you do it the richer you'll be. And all day you'll feel fresh, and immediate and on the spot." And so it goes on, ending up like this: "The colours are bright and the paintings are attractive and accessible. Mr. Wynter is a serious and

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gifted painter and will undoubtedly enjoy a deserved success; then he must guard against becoming the interior decorator's delight." But what is the difference between being a "first-rate decorative artist" and "the interior decorator's delight"? We are not told. And if he is first-rate, why is there this danger? And what are the precise virtues of "brightness", "attraction" and "accessibility"?

Maybe it seems that I am carping and unjustly forgetting the difficulties of compressing criticism into a very short space. But what in fact I am quarrelling with are not the verbal expressions as such, but the basic attitude behind them. The critic in this role is like a dog, wriggling its nose, and sniffing at scents to recognise them. It is a kind of reflex criticism. Sniff, sniff—Attractive. Sniff, sniff—Bright. Sniff, sniff—Personal Style. Whereas the real task of the critic is always to ask why? and, if possible, to answer the question as well. Why is it attractive? What makes a "personal style"? And does a personal style mean anything more than the fact that everyone has a personal handwriting? These are the immediate questions. Behind them, are more general ones. Why is it that artists today have broken with the whole world history of art to paint abstract pictures, pictures without subject matter? And then there are even more fundamental questions. Why is it that most contemporary art is unwanted, and most contemporary painters have to earn their living doing some other job? Why is it that the most imaginative works produced today are far more obscure than in the past? Why is there the widespread romantic interest in the lives of artists even among people who are not in the least interested in their works? The critic must live with such questions, be haunted by them, suffer in them, and always be trying to answer them more and more profoundly. Yet instead we have, Sniff, sniff—"surrealist influenced", Sniff, sniff—"elusive as a nightmare". Sniff, sniff—"very original". As I have said, art criticism in this country barely exists today.

### The conscience of the arts

Can it exist? Not only do I believe that it can, I also believe that it is essential for the development of art that it does. No intelligent thinker today is going to deny that we have a disintegrated culture; that is to say that art is created and exists in little pockets, instead of being part of the main stream of our social life. Equally no-one is going to pretend that this is a desirable state of affairs: both art and our consciousness within our social life suffer as a result of it. Opinions differ about how the situation can be remedied. Sir Herbert Read, for example, believes that it is primarily a question of education at the child level. Others believe that the solution lies in planning our physical environment differently: that the health of culture is very closely bound in with the size of the communities in which people live, and the degree of responsibility which they feel they have in their community. I, as a Communist, believe that the solution lies in social revolution, in releasing the creative popular energy which is now trapped within all the economic, ethical and aesthetic contradictions that exist in our present society. Perhaps there is a certain amount of truth in each of these arguments. It is not their rival claims which I now want to discuss. The point is that in each of these solutions, the critic has an essential function to perform. The specialised art critic is a recent invention. He hardly existed before

the nineteenth century, before the commencement of our cultural disintegration. It is conceivable that in the future he may finally disappear. Indeed, like the doctor, the critic works for his own redundancy. But whilst our cultural disintegration—or perhaps fragmentation is a better word—persists, the critic is essential because only he, by his constant questioning and his constant attempts to connect one cultural phenomenon with another, can link together the numerous "pockets". He is in fact the instrument, though not the force, for any kind of closer integration. Each of the above suggested solutions requires planners and it is the critic—who must stimulate and provoke these planners with his theories and observations. At the same time it is the critic who, by his understanding of the creative process, is in the best position to defend the artist from any unnecessary dogmatism the planners may acquire. Very roughly, one might say that the critic performs the function of a conscience. The artist, however rational he may be, works outwards from an inner passion. The planner, however imaginative, must—to perform his job—schematise intellectually. The critic is the conscience between this heart and mind. And that this is the essential role of the critic is proved, I think, by the fact that all the great critics have been moralists.

### Obsessed by the future

How far all this may seem from writing 500 words or so every week for any of our cultural parish magazines! How far it is, from being the conscience of the arts to standing before the literary editor's desk and hearing him say, "I think you ought to say a little more about Z—he's in the news you know, and he's an old friend of the editor's". But courage! We only see the triviality of a situation when we can see clearly beyond it. The critic differs from the historian in one important respect—he must be obsessed by the future. Only thus has he a hope of understanding the most imaginative of his contemporaries. He must look back at them from his imaginary future. And for that future he must fight—above all within his assessment of his own responsibilities. Therein lies his famous commitment. If his vision of the future is absurd, he will, like Tolstoy, write noble nonsense. If it is reasonable, he will. Apollinaire or Baudelaire, often discover the contemporary truth. If he has no vision of the future, he can only write nostalgic elegies to the past—to the days of the great traditions, or scribble reportage.

### The critic's sensibility

Who, however, is the critic? What qualifications must a man have to become a critic? Obviously the first qualification is that he must have a certain sensibility towards the art he chooses to criticise. Unfortunately the word "sensibility", like many others, has had its meaning turned upside down within the context of our recent culture. Sensibility has come to mean the degree to which a person is subjectively affected by an experience or a work of art. And in response to this idea, many works have been produced, the sole purpose of which is to stimulate sensations without emotionally or intellectually resolving them; the latest example being action painting—painting which tries to do more than demonstrate the physical movements of the painter and his pigment during the process of covering the canvas. Whereas, in fact, sensibility should mean the degree to which a person can discern how profoundly

a given work of art applies to life. Or at least that is a generalised way of putting it. In practice and in relation to the visual arts this means that a critic must be able to distinguish between good and bad drawing, between distortions that emphasise an aspect of the truth and distortions that merely surprise, between forms that are convincing because they establish a unity and forms that are unconvincing because they lack integration. Without doubt, the easiest way of developing such sensibility is to practise the art oneself—at least for a period of time. But it is not the only way. Sensibility can be acquired by passing observation and study—but not just, I must add, from historical learning. What has got to be developed is the rough equivalent of a piano tuner's ear: one has got to be able to recognise immediately whether a note rings true. And the ability to be able to recognise the influence of Rembrandt in the work of one of Rembrandt's followers does not necessarily guarantee this ability. Short of painting or sculpting oneself, the actual company of artists probably supplies the next best education.

Given then his sensibility, what else does the critic require?

Certain obvious qualifications which do not need elaborate explanation: he must have an adequate knowledge of the history of art, although not necessarily a specialised one: he must be able to write efficiently—the purely technical problem of describing visual works in words is a difficult one: and he must have a passion for teaching—so that he is prepared to go on saying the same thing over and over again.

### Using the tools of criticism

Such are the critic's tools. We must now come to the problem of how he should use them. In the last number Peter de Francia quoted Sir Herbert Read as saying that he believed the primary duty of the critic was to interpret the artist's intentions. De Francia then pointed out that such a view was based on the too narrow assumption that all art was inevitably ambiguous and therefore inevitably required interpretation. De Francia is correct. But Sir Herbert Read's attitude is very understandable. He is a man who has always championed experimentation in art and has always defended the most imaginative (and also, in my opinion, a few of the most silly) artists of our time against the mockery and anger of the Philistines. He can never forget how much the contemporary artist needs understanding and interpretation. He can never forget the excessive loneliness in which he works. Now, the straight-forward Philistine battle has long been over—the last action fought in this country was over the 1945 Picasso and Matisse exhibition. It is over, partly because no new artists under sixty have challenged the past in anything like the way Picasso's generation did, and also partly because "modern art" has in fact become fashionable. Its revolutionary discoveries have been wrenched from their context and turned into novelties. Nevertheless, the imaginative artists in our set-up still remains isolated. He is either ignored, or he suffers the misunderstandings of success which can be just as great as those of failure. Every critic, concerned with the state of art, knows this. And the knowledge of the loneliness of the genuine artist weighs heavily upon him. That is why I say Sir Herbert Read's attitude is understandable, and certainly more realistic than the complacency of the hacks who kid themselves that we today are different from our forefathers,

that *we* appreciate *our* artists, etc. Yet I believe that this concern of the critic about the artist being isolated and misunderstood, should lead him to accept a far wider and more profound responsibility than simply that of an interpreter. Of course he will incidentally interpret, but it should not be his primary aim for the simple reason that it is inadequate for bringing about any fundamental improvement of the artist's condition. First, the number of people to whom he can interpret is strictly limited. It is like translating Chinese into German. More people here can understand German than Chinese, but most people can't understand German either. And second, the artist's present position is not the result of public ignorance. It is the result of the values and structure of our whole society. And you don't have to be a Marxist to agree with that: to see for example that there is a connection between the mentality behind the vile crime of the new H bomb tests and the mentality behind the stuffed dummies that are officially erected as monuments to our public figures. There is in both the same dichotomy between the political face and the heart of man. And thus, the best service the critic can do the artist is not to stop at merely interpreting his work, but to go on to interpret his position in relation to the rest of society and to explain how the future of both art and society can be affected by that relationship.

### The leap of imagination

Another far less intelligent illusion about the function of the critic is the belief that the critic should actually write *for* the artist: that he should be a kind of teacher of painting. In fact, of course, anybody who understands painting at all can sometimes make helpful comments to an artist. But this is what happens in the studio; this is the stuff of personal conversation. And the idea that it should be elevated into a public activity with a public audience is only symptomatic of the fearful self-importance and egocentricity which bedevil so many cultural questions.

All right. I have now described the critic's tools and the purpose for which, I believe, he should use them. But I have still not dealt with the problem of *how* he uses them. And this, in fact is the most difficult thing to be precise about, because criticism is an imaginative activity and therefore its actual method is inevitably personal for each critic. It is commonplace that science, thought and the creative arts all depend upon the ability to *connect*. And it is almost a commonplace to point out that somewhere in the various processes of connecting there is always an imaginative leap. Exactly how the critic, who is after all a species of thinker, makes his imaginative leap cannot be laid down. I can only quote my own experience and hope that in some measure it will be relevant for others.

### The critical process

First, there is the immediate, direct and exclusive experience of the work itself. To this the critic must submit wholeheartedly. He must discover what it is that he is going to criticise. Pre-conceptions of any sort get in the way of this discovery. If the work happens to be a total failure, he will not be able to submit to its experience. One cannot criticise the total failure; one can only diagnose it,

Having discovered what he is faced with, he must then trace the work *backwards* to the artist's intentions and discover how these are related to its relative success or failure; then he must trace the work *forwards* to its likely effect, however small, on the general development of life: an effort which is achieved via its likely spectators.

He has now reached two conclusions: one about the cause of the work, and one about its effect. This cause and this effect are naturally implicit in the work itself. The work is the expression of the first and the agent of the second. But they are also linked in another way. The artist's intentions and the spectator's reactions are both conditioned by historical-social circumstances. The artist and the spectator are brought together by the work. But they are also linked together by the simple fact of their both belonging—even if separated by centuries—to the same continuous history of human development. This is almost axiomatic and only leads to the unstartling argument that the critic must consider works of art historically. Only those who have a religiously aesthetic attitude to art, those who indulge in the most extreme form of idolatory possible, would deny this necessity. And indeed, nowadays, whenever works of the past are discussed, the historical principle is to some degree always admitted. The difference between the standards of Negro and Greek art is not thought to be merely genius-ordained. The difficulty, however, comes when you are considering contemporary works, which are of course the critic's special responsibility. How do you introduce the historical principle when the artist, the critic himself and the public are all creatures of the same continuous present? This is the critic's fundamental problem: to see his own time in perspective. And it involves far more than his backing what the future may decide are winners. Unless one believes in an absolute code of morality, morality must concern itself with the consequences of actions. *And so it is the critic's attempt to see his own time in perspective that turns him into a moralist.*

I have said that the critic achieves this perspective by imagining himself in the future, looking back at the present as we look back at the past. But in itself this is only a device, a trick, and can easily deteriorate into a

kind of megalomaniac thinking: the critic simply crediting the future with all his own personal predilections. If his vision of the future is to have any real validity, it must be based on his understanding of the objective potential of the present: that is to say on his understanding of the discrete and overt processes of the inter-dependent cultural and social developments taking place in his own time. Personally, I believe that such an understanding will be immensely strengthened if it is based on the principles of dialectical materialism. But I do not want to argue that now. And I certainly do not want to be so dogmatic as to say that, lacking Marxism, the critic is bound to fail. Let us, instead, agree that the critic must have an endlessly inquisitive and open mind: and that his specialist knowledge of his art must be no more than the point of departure for his thinking—never its end.

The critic should have a finger on the pulse of all important contemporary affairs. Guernica was not only a painting. An engineering strike is not only an industrial dispute. Einstein was more than a noble head recalling a portrait by Rembrandt. He should make himself familiar with all the different divisions and levels of taste in his society—Al Read may be more revealing than the director of the Tate Gallery. He should know how artists, managers, old-age pensioners and boiler-makers live. He should be at least equally concerned with those who unsuccessfully challenge the fashions as with those who are made by them. He should follow, if only as an amateur, the development of the other arts besides his own. He should read at least two newspapers a day. He should be fearless in his opposition to all those who have a vested interest in preserving the status quo. The chances are that the critic will not be considered important enough to be judged by the future; but he must nevertheless serve it. The most imaginative and revolutionary artists create as an act of faith in the future. The duty of the critic is to guarantee that faith by understanding.

If he does this, it will not be tramps who will consider the word *Critic* the worst insult possible, it will be all those who actively and passively tyrannise, all those for whom the future, that the critic affirms, means retribution.