The Function of Criticism in *The Grove of the Eumenides: Essays on Literature, Criticism, and Culture*

EarthrisePress.Net

I

This new swarm
Of sophists has got empire in our schools.
—Matthew Arnold

During the twentieth century literature and criticism increasingly withdrew from their immemorial humanistic role into a repudiation of humankind's more noble capacities. The very possibility of such attributes received only dogmatic derision and scathing skepticism. Although valid reasons exist for scorning naive forms of optimism, since many of the events of the twentieth century negate much of what Western, as well as Eastern, civilization once revered, I take as axiomatic the observation that the intellectual climate of our age has become one of nihilism, nominalism, relativity, and every degrading interpretation of human nature of which man is capable of conceiving. These impulses have found vent in all the arts, proclaiming the death of humanism and the consequent loss of narrative action and intelligible human purpose. Precisely the same nihilistic interpretation of life found expression in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida and in the criticism influenced by him. As early as 1966 in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida starkly highlighted the radical difference between past interpretations of the act of interpretation and the presently dominant one:

> There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign. . . . The other, which

> is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who . . . has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game. The second interpretation of interpretation, to which Nietzsche showed us the way, does not seek . . . the "inspiration of a new humanism."

The skepticism seething in the phrase "dreams of deciphering" is characteristic of the alienated position of contemporary philosophy and criticism, which assume that degradation is the only realm of being and that to try "to pass beyond man and humanism" is commendable. I suggest the foremost poet-critics of English literature unabashedly sought, unlike so many critics today, the inspiration of humanism and held the highest task of criticism to be the creation of a current of ideas within which human capacities could develop in life, not merely in art. Such a conception ennobled the role of the critic and gave intelligibility to his social function that joined him to the human family. The Derridean criticasters signify the severity of both the alienation of criticism and the impasse at which intellectual and mass culture have arrived. For contemporary criticism merely reflects the tendencies of the time, the nihilism that pervades every level of modern, Western, indeed global, society. Despite themselves, the Derrideans have brought the turn away from "the origin" out into the open and have done so with a proclivity for sophistry and fatuous distinctions that puts Polonius to shame. Few perceptive readers would fail to say with Hamlet, "O Jephthah, judge of Israel, what a treasure hadst thou!"

It has always seemed to me that many of these academic critics fail to understand that criticism is indeed inferior to creative work. Often contemporary criticism affects a creative function that is beyond its ability to fulfill. Such affectation is a sign of confusion and, one cannot avoid the implication, a sign of their resentment and envy of the creative faculty. Such an observation seeks neither

to denigrate criticism nor to overestimate the work of writers. It is to assert a time-honored principle, which, like so many invaluable principles, has largely been lost. Although this is an age of criticism that seeks to affect its brilliance, its ability to reduce literature to something else, it must be acknowledged that much work has been accomplished, that much has been done to form a current of ideas within which new modes of creative endeavor can flourish. The incomparable role of criticism in the development of the mind can never be gainsaid, and much of the polemical work against deconstruction attests to its vigor. I believe few thoughtful minds can deny that criticism has been vitiated by its isolation within the academy, has often led to the perversion of contemporary literature, has often prostituted itself to the expedient, and has often drifted with the flow of prevailing academic opinion. Often I have recalled the words of Saul Bellow on the deconstructionists—a real writer would bury them.

If the state of affairs in academic criticism cloys with pretension and expediency, the repulsive stench of scholasticism, I submit that the criticism by poets during the last fifty years hardly fares much better. Rather, the dominant impression made by many poet-critics is one of unmitigated mediocrity, while what comes out of the so-called creative writing programs leaves even more to be desired. Almost without exception postmodern poets have tended to accept the reasoning and conclusions voiced by Wallace Stevens in his essays of 1951, *The Necessary Angel*:

> In an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost. Men feel that the imagination is the next greatest power to faith: the reigning prince. Consequently their interest in the imagination and its work is to be regarded not as a phase of humanism but as a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains.

This "indifference" is the same assumption that undergirds the work of Jacques Derrida and his criticasters. The postmodern breakthrough, whether in academic criticism or that of poets, bases itself on the assumption that man has at last passed beyond humanism and the dream of "full presence" to embrace the absurdity and nihilism that constitute the true ground of being. This excerpt also evinces the common belief that art is "a compensation for what has been lost." Like the romantics, this interpretation deifies the artist and the imagination beyond all reasonable bounds and perpetuates hubris in its misguided attempt at "self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains"—though even the self is called into question.

More recent poets have taken the self as the sole standard of their work. Elizabeth Bishop manifests in *The Collected Prose*, as in her poems, little awareness of anything outside her own small world. For a poet who makes so much of geography, who traveled widely, who lived in Paris, Mexico, San Francisco, Ouro Preto, London, Key West, Cape Cod, Boston, Worcester, Poughkeepsie, Petropolis, North Haven, Seattle, Greenwich Village, and Rio de Janeiro, she nevertheless fails to perceive the dominant emerging tendency of the age. I would think that a poet who was as endowed with sensibility as Bishop would have recognized the undeniable Dynamo that churned at the center of her century. For Robert Hass, in his essays *Twentieth Century Pleasures*, the self appears to be the only pleasure of which he can conceive. The title itself reduces literature and criticism to a strictly modern libidinous world lacking principles and dominated by impulse and sensation, as in his free-associating tone exhibited throughout the book. Basically the same rambling irrationalism and loss of value pervade the prose of Robert Bly, Philip Larkin, Theodore Roethke, and others among the postmodernists. Virtually all the prose of poets during the past fifty years advocates, to one degree or another, "self-assertion" as an ersatz for a coherent understanding and interpretation of life. Often these poets are rabidly anti-intellectual

and alienated, contend the rational mind has no role to play in creativity, and relegate literary criticism to the nether world of journalism. Such a failure to appreciate the role the critical faculty has in the creative endeavor underscores the extremity of their position, as does their frequently unqualified rejection of science and technology. Among postmodern poets, English or American, I look in vain for a single useful work of prose.

II

'Tis one thing to copy, and
another thing to imitate from nature.
—John Dryden

To the state of the utter decadence of contemporary criticism, I need only to compare the work of such poet-critics as Sir Philip Sidney, Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold, and T. S. Eliot. They all demonstrate the function of criticism is the evaluation of literature in its cultural and historical context in order to serve the reader in understanding its moral and philosophical tendencies and in discriminating between the genuine work of art and the fraudulent. In 1580 Sidney summed up the entire humanistic tradition of poetry and criticism in one pithy passage of his *Defence of Poesy*:

> Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word Mimesis, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end, to teach and delight.

In contrast to the "self-assertion" of postmodern criticism, Sidney's and Aristotle's mimesis presupposes a given objective world that the poet confronts in his work. Far from reveling in the subjectivism of modern literature, Sidney holds the purpose or end of poetry to be "to teach and delight." It is the "feigning" of "notable images of virtues, vices, or what else" that enables the

poet to move his reader to strive after virtue and that bestows on poetry and criticism an ennobling function. For Sidney, as for Homer, Virgil, and Dante, art is not separated from life. Rather, in echoing Aristotle, Sidney conceives of the poet as contemplating "what may be and should be" in order to delight men and to move them "to take that goodness in hand." Postmodern poets and critics, however, are alienated or embarrassed by moral considerations and imagine poetry does not, or should not, take cognizance of its responsibility to guide humankind toward what "should be." They mistakenly equate any vision of the moral duty of poetry with authoritarian regimes and religions that repress the individual. Sidney's teleology, which reflects his age, is that the "final end," of poetry and learning, "is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls... can be capable of." Far from curtailing the development of the individual, Sidney views poetry in consonance with a divine order and in service to the individual within that order. I maintain this connects poetry with a coherent interpretation of life and gives the poet a public function of the highest importance. Conversely, postmodernists choose to ignore fundamental questions of human nature, to imagine they can escape the burden of moral influence upon their readers, and to drift with the anti-intellectual mass that Sidney believes it is the duty of the poet, within the limitations imposed upon him, to serve and guide.

Sidney asserts that the poet proffers guidance primarily through the "speaking picture." To emphasize only the lesson is to devolve into diatribes, while to emphasize only the delight is to degenerate into amusements that lead ultimately to the freeplay and linguistic games of deconstruction and of many postmodern poets. For Sidney the aesthetic is not the sole criterion of art and neither is the cognitive or the moral. Rather poetry embraces all these qualities and cannot be dissected into separate, artificial categories without wreaking violence on its essential nature. The beautiful, the true, and the good are one. And all systematic knowledge, science in the old and proper sense of the word, has the same end.

This truth unites the writer with the public domain and gives intelligible, respectable purpose to his endeavors. Further, the poet "coupleth the general notion with the particular example," a "perfect picture" of the general or universal idea embodied in the particular or individual acts of men. Far from moralizing, the picture speaks for itself and moves the hearts of men in an intellectual realm beyond solipsism. Art becomes communal and serves the human family by embodying the highest vision of life that "should be" and by inspiring people to struggle toward it. As the ancient poet wrote, "Without vision the people perish."

In 1759 Samuel Johnson in *Rasselas* largely shares Sidney's conception of poetry as mimesis and his practice of criticism. Johnson invokes the general or universal qualities of poetry as Sidney had two-hundred years earlier. He has Imlac say of the poet in *Rasselas* that

> He must be acquainted likewise with all the modes of life. His character requires that he estimate the happiness and misery of every condition; observe the power of all the passions in all their combinations, and trace the changes of the human mind as they are modified by various institutions and accidental influences of climate or custom. . . . He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state; he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same.

This excerpt presupposes that the poet takes his material from "all the modes of life." Far be it from John Ashbery's statement that his own "poetry talks about itself." I cannot imagine Shakespeare or Johnson having had even a modicum of respect for such an assertion. Johnson holds that the very nature of the poet compels him to "estimate the happiness and misery of every condition," to create in his work that which is indicative of both the light and the fire. Such negative capability confronts the passions in all their

horrifying manifestations and comprehends the "virtues" and the "vices" with which the embodiments of the point at which darkness meets light are so endowed. Johnson thrusts through the masks of the "accidental influences" of both "climate" and "custom" to "trace the changes of the human mind" from a critical perspective that unabashedly believes in a moral and religious meaning to life and that discloses itself in "general and transcendent truths." Such a capacious perspective permits him to penetrate the prejudices of his age and country and the state of right and wrong, of good and evil. All this is routinely regarded as preposterous by most postmodernists who shamelessly declare their work has no subject or is merely about their own petty self. Such pathetic decadence has become so common that many postmodern poets and critics fail to realize that their diminished state of affairs results from a dominant historical and accidental influence on the conception of the literary endeavor and not from the intrinsic nature of literature.

Often postmodern poets and critics deride mimesis as though it were a tawdry copy of reality. But as Johnson writes in his Preface to Shakespeare, "Imitations produce pain or pleasure not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind." This conception is analogous to Sidney's understanding of the "speaking picture" that evinces the "general notion" through the "particular example." Both poet-critics believe in the existence of physical and ontological reality outside their own individual minds. To postmodernists, who dogmatically and irrationally deny any moral, religious, or humanistic interpretation of life, the word "reality" connotes fascist torture-chambers where those who waver from received ideologies are brought into conformity with the dictates of the ruling party. Such criticasters fail to realize the triviality and human treason of their own conceptions of reality that "pass beyond man and humanism" into an amoral cesspool of isolation and decadence. The sovereign power of mimesis lies precisely in its representation of universal principles in the particular example. Such a conception of literature maintains the

poet and critic have a commonality of experience with the community of men in the real world.

In the middle to late nineteenth century Matthew Arnold registers the anomalous changes in the community of men throughout his criticism and poetry. The moral and religious function of criticism is no longer affirmed. His work stands a great distance from the certitude of Sidney and Johnson. In 1880 in "The Study of Poetry," Arnold states quite clearly his awareness of the intellectual tendencies of the modern period and the concomitant changes in the function of criticism and poetry:

> There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. . . . More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.

Against the nineteenth century background of the discrediting of religion, Arnold turns to poetry for solace and intellectual sustenance, "to interpret life for us." Sidney and Johnson never conceived of poetry fulfilling such a role. Rather, with all humility, they both unabashedly held literature to be a handmaiden of religion. Conversely, Arnold stands in the full flood of the sweeping aside of the old order and declares poetry will replace religion and the philosophy of his day, the latter of which was still asking fundamental questions about human nature. His mention here of science appearing incomplete "without poetry" is actually nothing more than wishful thinking and a desperate stratagem to curtail the loss of the definition of science as the systematic knowledge of any discipline, which reduced its meaning to merely the natural sciences. He recognizes that all around him the old world is dissolving. His recognition of this background explains his

oft-repeated definition of criticism as "a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is thought and known in the world" since impartiality is always commendable but especially when the old certainties are "shown to be questionable." Hence he calls for criticism to stand off from politics and religion, the "burning matters," in hope of gaining a perspective that can ride the "turbid ebb and flow" of the tumultuous tide. Similarly he maintains criticism must be "independent of the practical spirit and its aims." This attempt to circumvent commitment leads him to a capitulation to the new tendencies by calling for a "growth toward perfection" that no longer is defined in any but the most nebulous and emotional terms. Without an external standard to determine both "the best that is known and thought" and "perfection," he can only rely, as Carlyle, Emerson, and Thoreau had, on the lingering values of Christianity, even as the latter two intensified the romantic turn to the East for sustenance.

Arnold vigorously asserts the utter inferiority of criticism to creative work and believes the poet must know life and the world in a sense still much closer to Sidney and Johnson than to the postmodernists. Further, he affirms, "the elements with which the creative power works are ideas." To such critics as the early T. S. Eliot, "ideas" are held in derision, are merely the matter that the "medium" has to express, the piece of meat one throws the dog to keep him content. Arnold could never have dallied with an autotelic conception of literature and criticism. His praise of the "high seriousness" of Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, and other classical poets presupposes poetry and criticism deal with concerns of the most universal importance. His Preface to his poems of 1853 evinces his awareness of the complexity of modern times, of the subjective sickliness of modern literature, of the malady that is still with us. In *Culture and Anarchy* Arnold writes of the malaise, "Everywhere we see the beginning of confusion. . . ." Still in the midst of the upheaval, he lacks the "clue to some sound order and authority." Yet he accurately perceives the turmoil of modern times, and, though he sought to replace religion with culture,

salvaged, for a while, the humanistic, intellectual, social, and moral values that Western civilization had held in unity for centuries. Today, what could possibly be more evident than the failure of letters to replace religion and to relate, as Arnold writes in "Literature and Science," "knowledge to our sense of conduct"? For Sidney, all science is unified by its end of lifting "up the mind" to "virtuous actions." But for postmodern poets and critics both science and conduct are often held in contempt: Science for creating the industrial, technological civilization that they imagine is responsible for tainting, as Galway Kinnell puts it, "the life of the planet," and conduct or "virtuous action" for serving as a stratagem of repressive regimes and religions. In place of a unified conception of life, fragmentation and alienation now rule the day.

T. S. Eliot's vaunted tradition serves as an ersatz as much as Arnold's culture. His sense of a "simultaneous order" of "existing monuments" fails to acknowledge that "the changes of the human mind," the distinct and major intellectual tendencies of each age, are more important for the poet-critic than any synchronic and poorly defined order might be. For poetry is not an "organic whole." There are diverse and incongruous currents. It is the utter incompatibility of Homer and Ezra Pound, of Sophocles and Samuel Beckett, of Dante and Eliot himself, that merits contemplation. The "historical sense," what Lionel Trilling calls the "sense of the past," must fundamentally take into account the irreconcilable and aberrant, the anomalies in the mind of Europe, in one's own country, and in the rest of the world. Hence Eliot's attempt to salvage the function of criticism leads him to concoct a tradition that in one signification never existed and in another was widely recognized to be in decline. Following a pseudo-scientific program for poetry and criticism, Eliot dehumanizes the mind of the poet into a "receptacle" that performs a "fusion" for "combination" of inert feelings, ideas, images, and other bric-a-brac plugging up his brain. This leaves the poet with nothing to do but express his "medium" cut off from his own personality and the collective, diachronic history of humankind. Like Arnold, Eliot grasps that "the accumulated wisdom of time" is endangered in the modern world, but his mythical method merely capitulates

to the general direction by discrediting what he seeks to preserve.

Eliot defines criticism as "the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste." How one might determine the constituents of taste or the values by which correction might be made is left as amorphous as many of the pronouncements of Arnold. Eliot of course waves in the direction of the church and classicism, impugns romanticism or the "Inner Voice," lambasts "Whiggery," and makes a few pertinent suggestions regarding the "chief tools of the critic"—comparison and analysis—but none of this confronts the ontological dislocation at its root. It is the tinkering of one disconcerted and baffled by the general tendency. The firm values with which Sidney and Johnson elucidated works of art and corrected the vitiated taste of their countrymen are nowhere to be found, other than in a few vague flourishes. As laudable as much of Eliot's procedure may be, his own obnubilation runs throughout his early criticism if not most of his work.

New Criticism produced so much useless criticism because it failed to understand adequately the following statement by Eliot: "I have assumed as axiomatic that a creation, a work of art, is autotelic; and that criticism, by definition, is about something other than itself." The autotelic definition of art was increasingly applied by Eliot's epigones to the intrinsic nature of poetry, as if it had nothing to do with life whatsoever and as if to do so was to commit some reprehensible deed worthy of only the concerted censure of every practitioner of "pretentious critical journalism." Criticism also adopted autotelicism and has now come to be about nothing "other than itself" in a manner apparently mimicked by some academic critics who delude themselves into believing there is no difference between creative work and criticism. Today I find it exhilarating to stumble onto an occasional piece of criticism that is about "something other than itself" or the extraction of tenure from the system of accreditation that is built squarely on the attenuated assumptions of modernity. Instead of confronting the major cultural tendencies of our time, most academic criticism is a virulent symptom of the nihilism advocated by Derrida, his followers, and much of our society. Eliot, for all his nostalgia, at least still believed in the "possibility of arriving at something

outside ourselves which may provisionally be called truth." The adverb reflects both a sense of the endangered tradition and humility—a virtue few deconstructionists have, given their grandiose schemes of negation.

Later on in life Eliot often articulated more fully that the reasons for the decline of criticism were moral and philosophical. He suggests in "The Frontiers of Criticism" how very different Johnson is from the "lemon-squeezers." What could be more perceptive than Eliot's observation that criticism has "lost its aims" and mistakes "explanation for understanding"? Explanation has now been proffered in terms of not only the origin of a work, linguistics, biography, and psychology of every contemptible brand, but also sundry Marxist persuasions, radical interdisciplinary and "cultural" studies, structuralism, deconstruction, anti-intellectual reader-response, the "new" historicism, gender, and extreme forms of multiculturalism. Everything imaginable has been tried to reduce literature from its moral, religious, and philosophical reality into the image of some small expositor. In 1961 Eliot, almost for the first time and perhaps out of revulsion with the abominations to which he had helped give birth, states unambiguously the relation of criticism to life in "To Criticize the Critic":

> . . . it is impossible to fence off literary criticism on other grounds, and . . . moral, religious, and social judgments cannot be wholly excluded.

Since the time Arnold began to fence off criticism from life, criticism has increasingly corrupted poets and widened the gap between them and the human community. Critics and poets themselves, as much as science, are to blame for the utter trivialization of the literary endeavor. Literature must confront the eternal state of man wrapped in all his virtues and vices. Instead, it has become all too often content to remain a symptom of the crisis of modernity, the general malaise. Critical perspective depends not only on the diachronic sense of history but also on values that can be found only outside literature.

III

For I believe we do not wholly die.
—Robert Browning

Sidney and Johnson unequivocally affirmed the locus of value in the transcendent, while the last two hundred years have witnessed the steady discrediting of any such locus. In "Mimesis and Allegory," in the *English Institute Annual, 1940*, W. H. Auden fully recognizes the relation between mimesis and the transcendent:

> Without an adequate and conscious metaphysics in the background, art's imitation of life inevitably becomes, either a photostatic copy of the accidental details of life without pattern or significance, or a personal allegory of the artist's individual dementia.

Since Auden wrote this excerpt, poetry and criticism have increasingly become "photostatic" copies of the "accidental details" of the self, bereft of any unifying vision of significance. I read everywhere chatty criticism, mildly vicious gossip, rambling interviews, anything but a unified perspective cognizant of the spiritual history of humankind as manifested in all the great religions of the peoples of the world. More often than not during the postmodern period we have had inflicted on us the "artist's individual dementia"—as in the work of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton. Such a distortion of the literary endeavor is an accident of history, an acceptance of a certain narrow conception of the function of the poet or critic.

The values that make us most human are not the alienation and nihilism of the *poète maudit*, the detestation of the bourgeoisie, technology, and the pragmatic; nor are they any of the other clichés of modernism such as disdain for the family and democracy. Far from such fragmented conceptions, I hold the values that have been revered for millennia are the most humane to which an artist can aspire. To varying degrees such observers of literature and

modern society as Max Weber, José Ortega y Gasset, Pitirim Sorokin, Alasdair MacIntyre, Robert Nisbet, Daniel Bell, Christopher Lasch, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Robert Bellah, Philip Rieff, Jacques Barzun, Allan Bloom, Alvin Kernan, and John M. Ellis have been especially sensitive to this truth, as were the best observers of civilization in the past, Ibn Khaldun and Giambattista Vico. These values and traditions are fundamentally spiritual in nature, transcend the individual and any particular era, connect the isolated consciousness with the community and with the past, and move the heart to sacrifice for higher ideals, as Achilles for honor and Aeneas for *pietas*. A healthy culture always reveres the human capacity for nobility, and so does a healthy literary period. Literature is the reflection of consciousness. Without virtue man is indeed a bedbug. Postmodernism has performed the mimetic duty of art by bringing us the news that mass society intuits but often continues to ignore: what we have lost.

The chief intellectual tendency of the modern age is the loss of belief in God—the transcendent One beyond the understanding of all religions. Whether in painting, literature, criticism, philosophy, architecture, or any other art since the Renaissance, the discrediting of the religious conception of life, whether in the East or in the West, has been progressing relentlessly and has had undeniably dire repercussions. I can only ask the reader to recall the appallingly barbarous acts of the many avowedly atheistic regimes to discern the perspicacity of Paul Johnson's observation that "the history of modern times" is largely the history of how the vacuum of the loss of belief has been filled. Influenced by the general background, many modernist and postmodernists have become so alienated from any religious conception of life that they uncritically adopt an attitude akin to Stevens' "indifference to questions of belief" or to Derrida's grandiose pass "beyond man and humanism."

Under the modern redefinition of science as only the natural and empirical sciences, many fail to realize that religious belief is based as much on conscious knowledge as is science. As T. S. Kuhn, Leon R. Kass, and others have shown, all science inescapably

contains a subjective element. The objectivity of science has its limit since science requires the assuming of beliefs, theories, absolutes, unknowns, for experimentation to proceed, to say nothing of its faith that order inheres in nature and can be discovered and understood, while errors in analysis can be eradicated. In his *Personal Knowledge* Michael Polanyi delineates his "ontology of commitment" and his concept of the "personal," which is neither subjective nor objective:

> It is the act of commitment in its full structure that saves personal knowledge from being merely subjective. Intellectual commitment is a responsible decision, in submission to the compelling claims of what in good conscience I conceive to be true. It is an act of hope, striving to fulfill an obligation within a personal situation for which I am not responsible and which therefore determines my calling. This hope and this obligation are expressed in the universal intent of personal knowledge.

As Polanyi says elsewhere, "the personal submits to requirements acknowledged by itself as independent of itself" and thereby is not subjective. Yet it is not wholly objective either since it constitutes what an individual conceives "to be true." The individual actively enters into commitment in an act of hope in a given situation "for which one is not responsible" and for which the "universal intent of personal knowledge" seeks to fulfill an obligation and calling, that is, a commitment. Such conscious commitment is "how a Christian is placed when worshipping God." Such a contemporary articulation of the understanding of the worshiping soul is just as true of all the great religions, whether Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam, and can only highlight the tragedy of the pervasive loss of our era.

Sidney's affirmation of the traditional understanding of the unity of all knowledge highlights the triviality of the common misconception of the relation between science and the humanities today. There need be no fundamental disagreement since all knowledge serves to "lift up the mind" to the mystery which men

have traditionally called God and to the enjoying of the individual's "own divine essence." Albert Einstein defined the mysterious as precisely the unifying realm of true art, science, and religion. The modern constriction of knowledge and meaning to science is actually indicative of the loss of the spiritual understanding of the mystery of being. Similarly the deterioration of literature indicates the same loss on the part of the artist as well as on the part of the mass of men. The narrow definition of knowledge is fallacious and now intolerantly denies half of what it means to be a human being since man is more than natural processes that are reducible to impersonal forces of determinism. By recognizing the fundamental agreement of all the sciences and humanities in their common creative urge to understand the principles of life and the universe, Sidney's era united human endeavor into an intelligible whole that gave meaning and purpose to the individual and to the community. For man is that being who seeks order, whether in science or art, by focusing his intuition and reason on the particular and moving to the universal. The postmodern abandonment of the search for a coherent understanding of life accepts the specious redefinition that relegates art and the transcendent realm of value to the nether world of the indifference of those who are content or eager to "pass beyond man" to what is less than human.

Another aspect of this redefinition of knowledge is the failure to appreciate that science is amoral or stands beyond good and evil. The discoveries of science merely present us with what is possible and not with an evaluation of how to use the new discovery or a judgment of what to do with it. On such questions science is neutral and proffers no intrinsic knowledge on humanity's goals or ends. The choice resides in the human realm of men, in their qualitative judgments, not in their quantitative ones. Only religion and art concern themselves with questions of value that arise from the predicament of man in a "situation" for which he is "not responsible." Such situations that demand choice reveal the potentialities of human beings. For it is only in the act of volition, often performed under stress, that people attain their noblest

deeds or manifest their illimitable capacity for horror and tragedy. Art that turns from the realm of commitment is rightly viewed as mere diversion or fluff. Similarly, when science retreats into an autotelic complacency that disregards the possible effects of its discoveries on human beings, such as nuclear weapons or military research, it becomes a caricature of its highest potential. This is neither to gainsay the immense benefits of science nor to advocate Ludditism. It is to affirm the unity of human nature and the dire consequences of denying and dehumanizing the spiritual capacities of man.

The naive optimism that the nineteenth century had for science and for progress was more than undercut by the harsh horrors of the twentieth century, perpetrated with the Krupp machine gun, mustard gas, the aerial bombardment of civilian populations, the Nazi death camps (run with scientific efficiency), the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the napalming of children. Such instruments of brutality brought the twentieth century approximately ten million dead human beings in World War I, fifty-five million dead in World War II, and twenty or more million slaughtered in the various regional and national conflicts since 1950. Added to this vast panorama of suffering are the sixty-six million or more of its own people that the former Soviet Union murdered for ideological reasons and the many millions who died either during the rise of communism in China or during its many subsequent upheavals. Excluding the long drawn out Napoleonic wars, these statistics should be contemplated in the light of the single most destructive war in the previous history of the world—the American Civil War, which, in comparison, resulted in the death of only approximately a half million people. Without the efficiency of science, the vast slaughter of modernity could never have been accomplished. Those who would contend there have always been nasty manifestations of the human capacity for brutality would do well to consider that the quantitative increase in the deaths of so many individuals constitutes an undeniably qualitative difference. It is this difference that has led to the frequent distrust of technology and to the fear of a nuclear or biological catastrophe that we might still fail to avert, given the

threat of terrorism. Only the most naive would imagine that human beings are incapable, through either omission or commission, of such enormity.

Against such a background those who prattle about the non-referentiality of language and passing beyond humanism must be seen as one of the grossest distortions of the human spirit ever to happen along. Far from sinking further into an academic withdrawal from such realities, I believe, as a writer, I must recognize the overwhelming pressure of the reality of our time and reconnect art with life. Czeslaw Milosz identifies precisely the standard that criticism and poetry must acknowledge if they are to recover their equilibrium and to merit again the respect of the human family: "The twentieth century has given us a most simple touchstone for reality: physical pain." I take it as a sign of our times that criticism often fails to be intelligent enough to conceive of itself and poetry as involved in any way with life. But social conditions have changed so radically since the symbolists sanctified the doctrines of alienation and since the modernists and postmodernists began to extend them that they now reveal themselves for the tawdry clichés that they are. The blood of millions has washed them away. The struggle between oppression and federalism has been one of the most important characteristics of the last hundred years and only by recognizing this struggle and throwing off the autotelic, alienated singing robes of the decadents can literature again probe what it means to be a human being at this juncture of time and space. As Milosz suggests in the following excerpt from *The Witness of Poetry*, it is in the reality of physical pain and in the "fragility of those things we call civilization or culture" that the poet must again reclaim his social function:

> The poetic act changes with the amount of background reality embraced by the poet's consciousness. In our century that background is, in my opinion, related to the fragility of those things we call civilization or culture. What surrounds us, here and now, is not guaranteed. It could just as well not exist—and so man constructs poetry out of the remnants

found in ruins.

The solipsism of postmodern poetry and criticism results from the paucity of "background reality" confronted by its practitioners. They revel so much in every form of "self-assertion" that they neglect the totality of human experience. Hence they spend their time on trivialities and the effete assumptions of nihilism, as in the work of Edward Hirsch and Robert Hass. But "the remnants found in ruins" call out to us and lead us back to our senses. If science has proven anything, it is that life could "just as well not exist." As Pablo Neruda wrote, *"Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta."*

IV

. . . for then the Earth
Shall all be Paradise, far happier place
Than this of Eden, and far happier days.
—John Milton

Criticism must take into account the major tendencies of modernity, the incessant "turn away from the origin," the long historical process that led through ever-deepening seas of blood. The touchstone of pain testifies to the inexorable process of events that has been tearing down the old world order of isolated, often monarchical peoples and nations, and slowly, steadily, despite all temporary setbacks, establishing the bonds of a new world order. Matthew Arnold's castigating of English provincialism and nationalism proves prescient beyond anything of which he could have ever conceived. The upheaval in creeds, traditions, and dogmas is but the preliminary to the welding together of the world. Arnold Toynbee perceives in his *Surviving the Future*, as throughout his work, the inevitable goal toward which modernity has been hurtling and understands the fundamental prerequisite for such a "revolution" is one in our "basic ideas and ideals":

> The people of each local sovereign state will have to renounce their state's sovereignty and subordinate it to the paramount sovereignty of a literally world-wide world government. But this revolution in mankind's political organization can be brought about only as a consequence of a far more radical and more profound revolution in our fundamental ideas and ideals.

Modern history has been preparing for this "revolution" in our social structure by sloughing off allegiances to narrow commitments, by replacing them with a growing consciousness of the interdependence of all peoples, and by forging new modes of cooperation among formerly antagonistic peoples. Such revolution is not taking place, as Milosz observes, "without high cost." It took the so-called "war to end all wars" to lead to the first constructive step toward world federal governance: The League of Nations. Yet its aims were subverted by the virulent nationalistic passions that hamstrung its Covenant and the Treaty of Versailles. After World War II, the United Nations, which rose out of the ashes of the hope of war-weary peoples for a lasting peace, was also hamstrung throughout the Cold War by the mutual suspicions and intrigues of its members.

As most of the major combatants of World War II turned to the interests of their own nations and most critics and poets were content to withdraw further into the self, one motley collection of people after another began their struggle for nationhood and claimed their independence. Despite exceptions and failures, much of the formation of unstable areas of the globe into sovereign states has been completed. Throughout South America, Africa, South East Asia, and the archipelagoes, new nations have arisen to play out their destiny on the global stage. The masses have further been brought together by the development of computer technologies and media that have culminated in the electronic global village, now nowhere more evident than in the vast potential of the Internet. Everywhere the peoples of the old order have assimilated or are assimilating the evolving new world culture that forms itself on the scientific and cultural achievements of Western

civilization. Far from this being a negative development, this process has allowed, for the first time in history, one substantially unified, though not uniform, world human culture to begin to emerge. This process is still forging and consolidating the "ideas and ideals," the values, the principles of world federalism upon which globally minded people will ultimately establish lasting and universal peace.

This global process has not failed to make an impact on national cultures. In the United States World War II led to the weakening of the chains of bondage for many African-Americans who previously had been denied access to many sectors of the economy. With the entry of America into the war, many industries employed blacks in record numbers. Similarly women were also employed in record numbers and in jobs that were formerly reserved for men. The door opened to human equality and opportunity for millions of minorities and further swept aside a system of oppression that had roots reaching back into slavery. It is no coincidence that shortly after World War II institutional racism in America suffered some of its most lasting defeats. With the rise of the civil rights movement and such persons as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., America at last began to move, however reluctantly, toward the fulfillment of the true meaning of its Constitution and to prepare itself, however unwittingly, for its continuing role of offering the basic principles of federalism and human rights to the entire globe. In 1967 in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Dr. King understands the connection between the nonviolent struggle of the African-American and what he calls the community of the "world house" in the context of the United Nations:

> The United Nations is a gesture in the direction of nonviolence on a world scale. There, at least, states that oppose one another have sought to do so with words instead of with weapons. But true nonviolence is more than the absence of violence. It is the persistent and determined application of peaceable power to offenses against the community—in this case the world community.

I have long felt that for the first time in history the human being now stands on the threshold of becoming what only the rare individual, such as Socrates, dreamed of—a world citizen.

The forces that still work against such a vision becoming an actuality are immense and not languishing in passivity. Provincialism and bigotry imbue each individual nation let alone the relations among sovereign states. More than vestiges of xenophobia linger. The difficulties that so often arise in the meeting of Western and Eastern peoples with one another, and with others of the globe, still hamper the thinking of many ordinary people, as well as those who conduct the international relations of their respective countries. Yet xenophobia is grounded in a provincial interpretation of other cultures that fails to appreciate both the beautiful diversity of human customs and the essential oneness of human nature, which "the prejudices of an age or country" leave untouched. Although numerous historical times exist around the globe and will continue to exist, their ultimate harmonization is readily conceivable and is taking place despite resistance. The barriers to understanding are diminishing often under the onslaught of dire international upheavals or incidents of terrorism that are compelling the proponents of provincialism to work together to find new means of cooperation. Such cooperative bodies and organizations as the European Community, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, the Central American Common Market, the Carribean Community and Common Market, the Association of South East Asian Nations, the League of Arab States, the Organization of American States, the Organization of African Unity, and the South Pacific Forum have all forged unprecedented relationships at a wider level than the nation-state. Similarly, the many conventions, treaties, and declarations of the United Nations, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration on Friendly Relations, the Declaration on Decolonization, the Convention

on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the various pronouncements on discrimination based on race, religion, or sex, the attention drawn to the plight of millions of the world's children through numerous proclamations, as well as many other humanitarian and scientific efforts to promote the well-being of humankind, confronted with the peril of global warming and pollution, have all served to forge, despite politicization, a wider consciousness among the peoples of the world.

The reality of man is his thought, and it alone stands in the way of a peaceful world. Not only has it become possible for a world federation to evolve to protect humankind from its innate passions but it has also become inevitable. All roads lead to unity, even the devastating path of universal nuclear conflagration. The major barrier is our persistent failure to conceive of world governance as anything other than a form of fascism, socialism, or communism. In practical terms, the new world order can be established only on the principles of federalism. To do nothing constitutes a repudiation of the manifest destiny of America to become as "a city upon a hill" cooperating with and beckoning to all humankind the global path to political peace and stability. In *The Abolition* Jonathan Schell perceptively identifies the impasse at which the world still stands:

> The requirement for world government as the inevitable price for nuclear disarmament is at the heart of the impasse that the world has been unable to break through in almost four decades of the nuclear age.

Far from actually circumventing this requirement with the post Cold War arms reduction treaties, which leave plenty of weapons for overkill, we must recognize that world governance need not be any grotesque polity, as some members of the original American colonies had feared would become of the new world, but rather, if we but have the will, it can become the

lasting haven of ourselves and the entire world, knit together by the highest ideals of the republican tradition. To imagine that we can remain indefinitely on the brink of annihilation without our choosing to follow the inevitable path of history through this putative impasse is the delusion of those who deny the direction of the vast horrors that mark the twentieth century and the portent of 9/11. Such a haven is possible, practical, and not a utopian vision. In the post Cold War world, history has not ended. Many inveterate problems will continue and endure, but, for the first time, they will receive the redress of the will of all the peoples of the planet. Wyndham Lewis once wrote, "A World Government appears to me the only imaginable solution for the chaos reigning at present throughout the world." Only within such a universal framework of value can society, literature, and criticism again find their bearings. The major powers must unequivocally recognize the global evolution of the international community toward unity, perceived by such champions of humankind as Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Dag Hammarskjold, and break through to a new path for the United Nations, one that fulfills the promise of its Charter to bring in the secure establishment of peace. No variation on the balance of power schemes of the past, the delusions of unilateral action, or a multipolar world will ever inaugurate the vision of the UN Charter, the instrument of the will of the Member States. Such UN initiatives as those in Kuwait, El Salvador, Cambodia, Mozambique, Bosnia, Kosovo, Haiti, East Timor, despite the at times impure motives of some of the participants, show we have already entered a new and welcomed stage in human history. And not even the retreat from and betrayal of the universal values of the United Nations, as was done by some member nations during the term of Boutros Boutros-Ghali, so devastatingly chronicled in his book *UNvanquished*, can in the long run stop this epic movement from reaching fruition.

Academic criticism that denies the moral, religious, and philosophical traditions of the Western world and passes "beyond man and humanism" to parasitic nihilism manifests the

major upheavals of our time and highlights the impasse at which the nay-saying capacity of man has brought us. I know there is a truth to its negation, and it is that negation surrounds us. Similarly poet-critics who retreat into the self highlight the national isolation or flight from the responsibility that is our birthright from the earliest settlements upon our shores. Criticism must embrace this capacious perspective of global humanism because it is incontrovertibly true, consistent with the history of humankind, and the highest locus of value within the quotidian realm. Social conditions have more than sufficiently changed to necessitate a repudiation of the anti-values of modernism and postmodernism, of the cheap intellectual clichés of what Saul Bellow called the wasteland outlook. The dominant tradition of our literature and criticism has unabashedly been humanistic and dedicated to the fullest possible development of the individual within his cultural and historical context. Such development has always held supreme the capacities of humankind for transcendence, selflessness, nobility, and love of God, family, country, and kind. The distortions that have historically evolved between reason and belief, science and religion, society and the individual, need not preclude poets and critics from perceiving the invincible hand of God guiding the affairs of man, through glory and turmoil, into that promised day when swords shall be beaten into plowshares and mankind shall be gathered together.