WHY CRITICISM MATTERS

***The Function of Criticism Today**: «Any critic who is any good is going to write out of a profound inner struggle between what has been and what must be, the values he is used to and those which presently exist, between the past and the present out of which the future must be born. This struggle with oneself as well as with the age, out of which something must be written and which therefore can be read – this is my test for a critic». – ALFRED KAZIN 1960*

***The Function of Criticism**: «The most important qualification which I have been able to find, which accounts for the peculiar importance of the criticism of practitioners, is that a critic must have a very highly developed sense of fact. This is by no means a trifling or frequent gift. And it is not one which easily wins popular commendations. The sense of fact is very slow to develop, and its complete development means perhaps the very pinnacle of civilization». – T. S. ELIOT 1923*

***The Function of Criticism at the Present Time**: «The critical power is of lower rank than the creative. True; but in assenting to this proposition, one or two things are to be kept in mind. It is undeniable that the exercise of a creative power, that a free creative activity, is the true function of man; it is proved to be so by man's finding in it his true happiness. But it is undeniable, also, that men may have the sense of exercising this free creative activity in other ways than in producing great works of literature or art; if it were not so, all but a very few men would be shut out from the true happiness of all men». – MATTHEW ARNOLD 1864*

***The Age of Criticism**: «Criticism demands of the critic a terrible nakedness: a real critic has no one but himself to depend on. He can never forget that all he has to go by, finally, is his own response, the self that makes and is made up of such responses – and yet he must regard that self as no more than the instrument through which the art is seen, so that the work of art will seem everything to him and his own self nothing». – RANDALL JARRELL 1952*

***Democratic Vistas**: «Our fundamental want today in the United States, with closest, amplest reference to present conditions, and to*

the future, is of a class, and the clear idea of a class, of native authors, literatuses, far different, far higher in grade than any yet known, sacerdotal, modern, fit to cope with our occasions, lands, permeating the whole mass of American mentality, taste, belief, breathing into it a new breath of life, giving it decision, affecting politics far more than the popular superficial suffrage, with results inside and underneath the elections of presidents or Congresses – radiating, begetting appropriate teachers, schools, manners, and, as its grandest result, accomplishing (what neither the schools nor the churches and their clergy have hitherto accomplish'd, and without which this nation will no more stand, permanently, soundly, than a house will stand without a substratum) a religious and moral character beneath the political and productive and intellectual bases of the States. For know you not, dear, earnest reader, that the people of our land may all read and write, and may all possess the right to vote – and yet the main things may be entirely lacking?» – WALT WHITMAN 1871

The Liberal Imagination*: «The job of criticism would seem to be, then, to recall liberalism to its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty. To the carrying out of the job of criticizing the liberal imagination, literature has a unique relevance, not merely because so much of modern literature has explicitly directed itself upon politics, but more importantly because literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty». – LIONEL TRILLING 1950*

The Critic as Artist*: «To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticizes. The one characteristic of a beautiful form is that one can put into it whatever one wishes, and see in it whatever one chooses to see; and the Beauty, that gives to creation its universal and aesthetic element, makes the critic a creator in his turn, and whispers of a thousand different things which were not present in the mind of him who carved the statue or painted the panel or graved the gem». – OSCAR WILDE 1890*

In this last chapter the texts written by six accomplished modern literary critics are gathered. They explain what it is they do, why they do it and why it is important.

Text 1
Beyond the Critic as Cultural Arbiter
By STEPHEN BURN

Stephen Burn is the author of «David Foster Wallace's 'Infinite Jest': A Reader's Guide» and «Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism», and an editor of «Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers». An associate professor at Northern Michigan University, he has written for The Paris Review, The Yale Review and The Times Literary Supplement, among other publications. He is writing a book about the novel in the age of neuroscience and is editing a volume of David Foster Wallace's letters about literature.

Fifty years is a long time in any national literature, but in the extreme environment of American culture, fiction seems to find an incubator for unusually rapid growth. A half-century takes us from the era of formulaic romances and Gothic novels to the metaphysical theater of «Moby-Dick»; from Mark Twain working on his autobiography to John Barth's first novel. Yet across the 50 years since Alfred Kazin lectured about the function of the critic, academic literary criticism in America has arguably changed more than the modern novel, while the kind of critic that preoccupied Kazin – one who writes for the public, «lives in literature» and tries to create standards – now finds her function revised by technological changes that have reconfigured an audience that was once atomized by America's urban sprawl.

«In the lonely pockets of towns and cities», Don DeLillo wrote in the early 1980s, «a thousand minds tick». A decade or so later the commercialization of the Internet wove a network out of those minds, building a kind of massive neural web, a brain by turns conflicted, noisy, urgent. The Internet calls people out of their loneliness to create electronic selves perhaps more naked or strident than the fuzzy, compromised «I» that moves ghostlike through its everyday routines and disagreements. A solitary reader, brooding over an obscure contemporary novel, or slowly puzzling out a page of «Finnegans Wake», is suddenly not so solitary. Amid the network of networks there is always another reader, an improvised community into which she can merge and make visible her invented self.

Seated on the cusp of the network revolution, the critic Sven Birkerts cataloged the losses that a reader in the electronic millennium would suffer: divorce from historical consciousness, a fragmented sense of time, a loss of deep concentration. From the other side of the divide, the ability to locate a cluster of like-minded people must seem a real gain to the reader who finds isolation uncomfortable rather than one of reading's fertile preconditions.

Yet, however the economy of costs and benefits is calculated, the change in the technology that organizes the audience changes the rest of the writing world. Some writers may try to seal themselves off from the crackling energy of the Web, but the contemporary novel's form is always a model of the way our minds work, and it registers the deep changes in the ways we process data. Even more markedly than in the late 20th century, the serious contemporary novel withdraws from linearity, its narrative particles grouped into weblike clusters connected implicitly rather than explicitly, and its focus distributed across several characters. For the critic, these technological changes create deep historical echoes. If in earlier centuries the common reader was for Johnson and Woolf at least partly a rhetorical construction, an imagined nonspecialist that enabled their own work, for the critic at the millennium the audience for literature is not so shadowy. While Kazin could complain in 1960 that «the audience doesn't know what it wants», with the advent of Amazon reviews and other rating sites the audience is abundantly vocal. A sensitive membrane has evolved from the historical transactions between author, critic and reader. Though online reviews inevitably vary in quality and insight, their very existence no longer makes it possible to imagine that there is not an engaged general-interest audience out there consuming and thinking about literary works. The audience now talks to itself.

The critic may not know who these readers are, but their existence seems indisputable, and the crystallization of the common reader changes the function of criticism in precise ways. The age of evaluation, of the Olympian critic as cultural arbiter, is over. While there are still critics out there, often at prominent publications, who like to issue dogmatic rulings and to chastise writers, their nostalgic efforts merely add to the noise of culture. Opinion in a distributed culture is abundantly, excessively, available, and as electronic self-construction accelerates the transformation of the private interior landscape into a Facebook page for public approval, personality becomes a debased currency. Less than six weeks after Jonathan Franzen's «Freedom» was published, Amazon offered more than 300 frankly polarized customer reviews. Thinking of reading Toni Morrison's «Beloved»? Nearly 700 readers have an opinion they'd like to share with you. The electronic footprint of earlier readers and their opinions exerts its tyranny on the solitary transaction between book and reader, and so in mainstream reviewing it's time to hear less of critics talking about themselves, spinning reviews out of their charming memories or using the book under review as little more than a platform to promote themselves and their agendas. The critic ought to be an obscure, marginal figure, but I suspect that the tendency to overpersonalize a review stems from a sense

among reviewers that part of their job has been usurped by the muddy aggregate of opinion that is everywhere available on a laptop somewhere near you.

The loss of a more centralized, univocal criticism is not necessarily a bad thing. Surely most readers (and probably a few authors) have seen reviews by prominent critics whose work is notoriously poisoned by personal prejudice, and guessed what pre-established verdict would be delivered to the work under review. Equally, I expect I'd have more confidence in the best nonspecialist readers than I do in some of their professional counterparts. In my short academic career I've been surprised, for instance, to discover professors of English who have lost interest in literature in favor of pursuing institutional power in the shape of administrative positions. And while the removal – or more accurately, the redistribution – of the evaluative task is likely to dilute critical standards, it can also free up the critic to engage in more serious tasks that might bleed back into the culture, providing a stronger skeleton for a range of literary activity. The critic who reviews contemporary novels now might valuably turn her attention to different kinds of vertical or horizontal mapping. By vertical mapping, I mean that larger frames than the personal might be brought to bear in reviews, with more effort taken to think of genres within less narrow, rigid borders. I sometimes fear that a narrow artistic palette can be mistaken for critical standards, and I believe it's past time to dispense with prejudices about character, emotivity and realism that hardened during the 19th century: a strongly realist character-based novel isn't a bad thing, but it isn't the only thing. A contemporary novel offers an opportunity to measure fiction's mutating forms – to note, perhaps, the dominance of time as a thematic obsession in works of the last 20 years, or the emergence of the family epic, with its generational conflicts, as it becomes perhaps the signature subgenre of the American novel today. Equally, critics might overhaul their sense of a static literary past and think instead of the novel actively engaging with its forebears. By this I don't mean the small-scale connect-the-dots vision of T. S. Eliot, where a new work is related to a limited group of masterworks, but rather a much longer, more inclusive vision that might take as its model Steven Moore's recent encyclopedic study, «The Novel: An Alternative History», which dramatically amplifies our understanding of what the novel can and cannot do, and highlights living currents that sprang into existence 40 centuries ago and continue to flow into the contemporary novel.

Alongside this vertical effort to ascertain where a work fits into the contemporary and historical field, a review can also be a horizontal map that moves from the standard direct quotation (be sure to let the reader «get

his own taste» of a text, Updike warned critics in 1975) to an analysis of the hidden springs that govern the shape of the novel's sentences, or to an effort to establish a dialogue with the intellectual currents in other disciplines that have informed or challenged the work under review. In some cases, this horizontal mapping may require deeper research, or a closer sense of what novelists believe they're doing. Though a novelist's stated intentions shouldn't override a critic's internal barometer, it's nonetheless disappointing that there are probably fewer print publications where a book critic might interview contemporary authors than there were even 30 years ago, when Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery released their landmark interview collection, «Anything Can Happen» (1983).

Good criticism, with ideas rather than prejudices, has always performed this kind of mapping and has found, as Kazin argued, the work to be its own reward. The culture is what it is – messy and multi-valent, open to a certain range of entertainments and cultural expressions – and the critic's yearning to dominate a larger audience is an index of the extent to which he or she finds the critical task insufficient in itself. Stepping aside from the culture of opinion, delving deeper into open-minded analysis, critics might fulfill their most important function: locating major works that are not always visible in mainstream networks.

Text 2
With Clarity and Beauty, the Weight of Authority
By KATIE ROIPHE

Katie Roiphe is the author, most recently, of «Uncommon Arrangements: Seven Marriages». She is a professor at the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute at New York University and is currently at work on a book about writers' confrontations with mortality.

Is it time to write about the Death of the Critic, the proliferation of the app, the rise of the screen, the end of the discerning reader who curls up on a sun-dappled couch and devotes herself to serious books and their interpreters? Has the critic become a quaint and touching figure engaged in an irrelevant, positively medieval pursuit, like monks illuminating manuscripts?

Before the requiem begins, we have to admit that critics have always been a grandstanding, depressive and histrionic bunch. They – and by «they» I mean «we» – have always decried the decline of standards, the end of reading, the seductions of mediocrity, the abysmal shallowness and distractibility of the general public, the virtually apocalyptic state of

literature and culture. Yet somehow the bruised and embattled figures of both the writer and the critic have survived lo these many centuries.

There is, for the critic, a certain romance in describing oneself as standing in the midst of a grave intellectual crisis, solitary, imperiled, in the vast desert of our cultural landscape. There is, in this stance of the underdog defender of all that matters, a certain pleasing drama, an attractive nobility. In 1958, Randall Jarrell wrote, «By this time you must be thinking, as I am, of one of the more frightening things about our age: that much of the body of common knowledge that educated people (and many uneducated people) once had, has disappeared or is rapidly disappearing». In 1960, Dwight Macdonald wrote, «A tepid ooze of Midcult is spreading everywhere». And Vladimir Nabokov observed in his masterpiece of criticism, «Lectures on Literature», that some of his students' ears were «merely ornamental». Going back even farther, we can see the same tendency toward the dark, melancholic view: in 1865, Matthew Arnold wrote, «Yes, the world will soon be the philistines'» and «How prevalent all round us is the want of balance of mind and urbanity of style».

So at this juncture we can take with a grain of salt our definite sense and encroaching fear that our audience of educated readers is shrinking. The world, as we can now inform Arnold, stubbornly resists going entirely to the philistines; the world is not finished with its Janet Malcolms and James Woods, its Harold Blooms and Michael Woods.

If the critic has to compete with the seductions of Facebook, with shrewdly written television, with culturally relevant movies – with, in short, every bright thing that flies to the surface of the iPhone – that's all the more reason for him to write dramatically, vividly, beautifully, to have, as Alfred Kazin wrote in 1960, a «sense of the age in his bones». The critic could take all of this healthy competition, the challenge of dwindling review pages, the slash in pay, as a sign to be better, to be irreplaceable, to transcend.

Now, maybe more than ever, in a cultural desert characterized by the vast, glimmering territory of the Internet, it is important for the critic to write gracefully. If she is going to separate excellent books from those merely posing as excellent, the brilliant from the flashy, the real talent from the hyped – if she is going to ferret out what is lazy and merely fashionable, if she is going to hold writers to the standards they have set for themselves in their best work, if she is going to be the ideal reader and in so doing prove that the ideal reader exists – then the critic has one important function: to write well.

By this I mean that critics must strive to write stylishly, to concentrate on the excellent sentence. There is so much noise and screen clutter, there are so many Amazon reviewers and bloggers clamoring for attention, so

many opinions and bitter misspelled rages, so much fawning ungrammatical love spewed into the ether, that the role of the true critic is actually quite simple: to write on a different level, to pay attention to the elements of style.

Of course, it is not considered nice or polite or democratic to take the side of the paid critic (though, to be fair, she is paid very little) over the enterprising amateur who would like to shout anonymously on the Internet, but that's precisely what is called for – unless, of course, the enterprising amateur writes better than the paid critic. The answer to the angry Amazon reviewer who mangles sentences in an effort to berate or praise an author is the perfectly constructed old-fashioned essay that holds within its well-formed sentences and graceful rhetoric the values it protects and projects. More than ever, critical authority comes from the power of the critic's prose, the force and clarity of her language; it is in the art of writing itself that information and knowledge are carried, in the sentences themselves that literature is preserved. The secret function of the critic today is to write beautifully, and in so doing protect beautiful writing.

If critics can fulfill this single function, if they can carry the mundane everyday business of literary criticism to the level of art, then they can be ambitious and brash; they can connect books to larger currents in the culture; they can identify movements and waves in fiction; they can provoke discussion; they can carry books back into the middle of conversations at dinner parties. Here I think of James Wood's essay «Hysterical Realism», which skewers the pyrotechnical trendiness of a certain generation of writers; or of Janet Malcolm's «Silent Woman», which exposes the psychological ambiguities at play in the production of biography; or of Virginia Woolf's «Room of One's Own», which is essentially a dazzling novel on the difficulties of writing as a woman; or of Susan Sontag's «Against Interpretation», which takes on the arduous, paradoxical labor of criticism attacking criticism. What separates all of these works from the din of opinion, from the impassioned amateur review, from the grouchy blogged snark or the Facebook status posting, is the beauty in the sentence, the craft itself.

Consider great and exquisite lines of criticism, from Jarrell: «If Picasso limited himself in anything he would not be Picasso: he loves the world so much he wants to steal it and eat it». Or from Woolf: «Mr. Joyce's indecency in 'Ulysses' seems to me the conscious and calculated indecency of a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows. At moments, when the window is broken, he is magnificent. But what a waste of energy!» It is the poetry of these descriptions that rises above, that describes, anatomizes and pins down. Here we can observe, in action, another secret purpose of the critic: to entertain. Great criticism is more fun, when it comes down to it, more passionate and more useful and

more economical than scrolling the stars of the Amazon critic who reviews, say, Jonathan Franzen's «Freedom» thus: «It seemed trivial and after getting my interest, it would end up talking about someone or a period in time totally different. It left me confused, but still interested. I should say I listened to an audiobook version. Possibly that contributed to confusion. This is supposed to be a really great book according to Oprah».

To those who doubt the beleaguered but well-spoken critic's influence, his ability to provoke or sway, I would submit a tiny piece of anecdotal evidence from the classroom. I have seen students rush out to buy «Anna Karenina» because an essay by James Wood made them feel that Tolstoy was essential. If it's even just these couple of students, alone on planet Earth, who have read that essay and rushed out, those couple of students are to me sufficient proof of the robustness and purpose of the eloquent critic, of his power to awake and enlighten, of his absolutely crucial place in our world.

But let's go back to the seductive and dramatic despair we in the business of writing and thinking about books continue to feel. Is the entire rich and textured English language really on the verge of being reduced to text messages? Can an 18-year-old really not understand why a sentence of Hemingway or Wharton is more charismatic than a tweet? I am not entirely convinced. We could view the sight of a well-dressed businessman in a houndstooth suit reading Gary Shteyngart's «Super Sad True Love Story» or David Mitchell's «Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet» on an iPad as he waits in the beige antechamber of the doctor's office as a sign not of the death of the book, but of the irrepressibility of literature.

To the dangerously dwindling reading public – and to the serious, unshaven young man in a coffee shop somewhere in Brooklyn, just now shooting me a dirty look as he bangs out his essay on the death of the critic and the death of literature and the death of our attention spans on his shiny laptop – I humbly suggest that the situation is more stable than we suppose. The ancient power of a story well told will endure, along with its interpreters and critics, and technology will continue to evolve and unsettle, to dazzle and madden us, to create its cultural crises and elicit its handwringing. I think we can say with confidence that in 200 years Anna Karenina and her men will still exist. And the iPad – who knows?

Text 3

The Intellectual at Play in the Wider World

By PANKAJ MISHRA

Pankaj Mishra is the author of the novel «The Romantics» and the nonfiction books «An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World» and

«Temptations of the West: How to Be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet and Beyond». A fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, he contributes essays and reviews to The New York Review of Books, The New Yorker, The Guardian of London, The London Review of Books and n+1.

I don't think of myself as a literary critic. I write about novels and short stories. But I am reluctant to describe what I do as «literary criticism», as I like to move quickly beyond the literariness of a text – whether narrative techniques or quality of prose – and its aesthetic pleasures, to engage with the author's worldview, implied or otherwise, and his or her location in history (of nation-states and empires, as well as of literary forms).

This kind of reading came naturally to me in the new, very poor and relatively inchoate Asian society in which I grew up. When I first began to read literary fiction I could assume neither a clear backdrop of political and social stability, nor a confident knowledge of the world and assumptions of national power. Everything had to be figured out, and literature was the primary means of clarifying a bewilderingly large universe of meanings and contexts.

Much of my self-education was assisted by American writers like Edmund Wilson, Dwight Macdonald, Lionel Trilling, F. W. Dupee and Irving Howe. Some of these were literary critics, but they were, above all, public intellectuals (a species whose irrelevance and powerlessness Alfred Kazin seems to be mourning – rather more than the demise of a critical genre – when he writes, «We are rushing into our future so fast that no one can say who is making it, or what is being made; all we know is that we are not making it, and there is no one, no matter what his age is, who does not in his heart feel that events have been taken out of his hands»).

Coming of age during and after the progressive era, when intellectual argument and political activism promised to reshape America's future, these critics took it for granted that literature was among the main signs of the times, and subject to the inquiring gaze of history and politics.

In this presumption, they were supported not so much by the Marxian ideologues of the 1930s as by the great realist novelists, from Stendhal to Tolstoy and Mann, who could not have written their most mature works without grappling with the political and moral challenges of their day. Ideas possessed a real urgency for these writers. It helped, too, that their societies were in ferment; that the bourgeois class, to which most writers and readers of literary fiction belonged, was deeply involved or implicated in major socioeconomic conflicts; and that politics wasn't something elected politicians and unelected corporate elites settled among themselves.

Compared with their realist predecessors, most contemporary fiction writers in America and Britain appear to be cultivating their own gardens,

on expansive plots given them by their powerful and affluent cultures. Not surprisingly, many writers in the West experienced the terror attacks of 9/11 as a profound challenge to their art and its underlying (and, in retrospect, quite strange) assumptions of security and stability in a conflict-ridden world.

Too many of today's writers – the creative writing graduates, the beneficiaries of generous advances and foundation grants, and the habitués of literary festivals in exotic locations – are enlisted too quickly into society's privileged classes to remain, convincingly or for long, society's critics.

Literary criticism, in its recent American incarnation at least, has faithfully reflected the general writerly retreat from the public sphere, turning into a private language devised to yield a particular knowledge about a self-contained realm of elegant consumption. It is hard to imagine recent American literature provoking a critical response in the way of Kazin's magnificent study «On Native Grounds» (1942), which sensitively recorded the evolution of many literary sensibilities against a prewar backdrop of continuous crisis and struggle.

So I can recognize, and even feel the poignant anguish, of Kazin's sense of an ending, his feeling that «the great confidence that man could understand his time and build from it, the feeling that provides the energy of modern art, has gone out of us». But I cannot share it, since literary criticism, as Kazin defines it, began to die off some time ago. (And I am not even speaking here of the cloud-cuckoo-land of literary theory and its weird cults of academic technicism and tenured ideologues.)

The critic who, in Kazin's words, «sees himself working toward the future that man must build for himself» has long been a dodo; his or her reappearance today might simply excite derision among a postpolitical generation accustomed to seeing all talk of building futures as a form of deception.

The widespread belief Kazin blames for the irrelevance of criticism – «that literature cannot affect our future, that the future is in other hands» – of course took hold in cold-war America. This is not the place to go into the all-encompassing political and cultural changes that occurred then, or to account for the «pervasive feeling» expressed by Kazin that «our freedom is being taken away from us». But it may be worth briefly reflecting on the astonishing speed with which the radical ideas and impulses of pre-World War II America vanished from public life, with only traces lingering in some academic outposts and isolated sensibilities like Edmund Wilson's.

There is little point in blaming «New Criticism», which fetishized the uniqueness and autonomy of literary works, or in lashing, yet again, the

dead horse of creative writing departments, which prescribe an antihistorical formalism while turning a noble vocation into yet another moneymaking opportunity. For these practices are merely symptoms of a larger phenomenon that, deepening through the cold war, is only more manifest now: mass depoliticization as political and economic arrangements seem depressingly unalterable.

«In our political as in our economic lives», Tony Judt wrote in «Ill Fares the Land», a lament for moral idealism and engaged citizenship, «we have become consumers». A similar docility marks our cultural choices. Most writers as well as readers of literary fiction see it as a refined form of entertainment or instruction.

Deprived of a whole vocabulary of moral concern, which traditionally enlisted it into a humanistic culture, literary criticism was always destined to turn into a kind of competitive connoisseurship – a parlor game for the increasingly professional producers as well as the passive consumers of literature. It can have its intelligent pleasures; but, determinedly asocial, it is far from bringing, as Kazin wanted it to, a «historical sense of what has been, what is now, what must be» into «the immediate confrontation and analysis of works of art».

The previous decade of severe political and economic shocks may end up opening literary criticism and literature to the questions Kazin and his peers asked of them. But then ours is also a much bigger and more various world than the one Kazin knew. We have easy access to knowledge of societies and cultures about which we were previously ignorant; and there is no reason to assume that writing from Europe and America is all that matters, or should matter, to a critic today.

Literatures elsewhere still offer a capacious mode of intellectual inquiry, one that can seamlessly accommodate the insights into human lives offered by history, philosophy and ethnography. To examine the work of Lu Xun, China's foremost modern writer, is to be taken through his anguish deep into Chinese self-perceptions, from the long Confucian past to the weirdly hybrid capitalist-Communist present. It is to understand not only his experiments with many different aesthetic forms and genres, but also his country's tormented recent history, not to mention the implications these developments hold for the rest of the world.

Indeed, the specific historical circumstances that confine the critical reception of literatures in Europe and America to a few specialists do not exist anywhere else. Societies in Asia and Latin America are far from politically static or jaded; the conflicts, exuberance and vulgarity of 19th-century Europe and America have reappeared there in magnified form, and an inquisitive writer-critic can only revel in them.

Both Liu Xiaobo, the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner from China, who is a literary critic by profession, and Mario Vargas Llosa, the literature laureate from Peru, testify to the impossibility of considering aesthetic matters in isolation from social and political movements. They confirm that a writer's individual self-awareness is always historically determined, and that one cannot assess a writer's work without examining her particular quarrel with the world, the rage or discontent that took her to writing in the first place.

A concentration on personal style alone may also reveal the richness or banality of a writer's imagination. But the line of inquiry that connects a writer to her world runs through quirks of individual personality and literary manner to broaden into larger moral and political issues. The critic who follows this method, staying close to the texture of social history as well as to aesthetic experience, is likely to avoid the intellectual isolation and self-pity of the kind Kazin describes.

Certainly the critic's curiosity, endlessly ramifying, will keep him very busy – and gratified. For as Edmund Wilson, a compulsive learner of new things, once put it:

«The experience of mankind on the earth is always changing as man develops and has to deal with new combinations of elements; and the writer who is to be anything more than an echo of his predecessors must always find expression for something which has never yet been expressed, must master a new set of phenomena. . . . With each such victory of the human intellect, whether in history, in philosophy or in poetry, we experience a deep satisfaction: we have been cured of some ache of disorder, relieved of some oppressive burden of uncomprehended events».

Text 4
The Will Not to Power, but to Self-Understanding
By ADAM KIRSCH

Adam Kirsch is a senior editor at The New Republic and a book critic for Tablet magazine, and has written for The New York Review of Books and The New Yorker. He is the author of several books of poetry and criticism, as well as a biography, «Benjamin Disraeli». His book «Why Trilling Matters» is forthcoming

Three years ago, Cynthia Ozick published an essay in Harper's Magazine lamenting the decline of criticism, which she argued was impoverishing literature itself. Without the «consciousness that only a critical infrastructure can supply», Ozick wrote, readers and writers are doomed to talk at cross-purposes, or at random; it takes a corps of

influential critics to unite individual reactions into a common discussion. Indeed, this excellent novelist and excellent critic concluded, «Superior criticism not only unifies and interprets a literary culture but has the power to imagine it into being». To see what we are missing, all we have to do is contrast our own moment with the postwar decades «when Lionel Trilling prevailed at Columbia», and «Edmund Wilson, Irving Howe and Alfred Kazin enlivened the magazines».

There is a grim comedy, then, in turning to Kazin's essay about criticism – written in 1960, when Ozick's giants walked upon the earth – and reading about «the absence of echo to our work, the uncertainty of response, the confusion of basic terms in which we deal». It seems to be a case of «the worst is not / So long as we can say, 'This is the worst.'» What looked to Kazin like a dwindling, fissiparous literary culture looks to us like a golden age. (As yet another great critic, Randall Jarrell, once said, in a golden age people go around complaining about how yellow everything looks.)

If you are writing poetry, or even fiction, the best response to the «absence of echo» is probably indifference. The echoes that creative work provokes are generally too quiet and internal to be measured by indexes like sales figures. Things are somewhat different for a critic, since the critic is necessarily more conscious than other writers of his own will, of what he wants to happen in the world as a result of his writing. As Kazin puts it, «He writes to convince, to argue, to establish his argument».

But if this were a critic's only purpose, his will would merely be a will to power. And a critic who writes primarily out of a will to power (they do exist; they could be named) is never a great critic, or a lasting one. Increasingly, I feel that argument is only the form of criticism, not the substance, just as passing judgment on a particular book is only the occasion of criticism, not the goal. It's better – certainly it's better for the critic – not to see criticism as a means of making things happen, of rewarding and punishing, or of becoming what Kazin calls a «force». The critic participates in the world of literature not as a lawgiver or a team captain for this or that school of writing, but as a writer, a colleague of the poet and the novelist. Novelists interpret experience through the medium of plot and character, poets through the medium of rhythm and metaphor, and critics through the medium of other texts.

This is my definition of «serious criticism», and I think it's essentially the same today as it was 50 years ago: a serious critic is one who says something true about life and the world. The critic's will is not to power, but to self-understanding, self-expression, truth. A review by Edmund Wilson in The New Yorker might once have had the power to drive a book's sales up or down, but that's not why we continue to read «The

Wound and the Bow». Lionel Trilling never had that kind of concrete power, but that doesn't stop us from continuing to read «The Opposing Self». These books are classics of criticism because they each show a mind working out its own questions – about psychology, society, politics, morals – through reading. In this sense, Wilson and Trilling and other critics in their tradition, of whom Frank Kermode might have been the last example, show us what reading can be: a way of making one's self, one's soul.

Of course, this is an ideal. Most of the time, depending on the kind of piece she is writing, the critic also has other responsibilities. She is a journalist: a review is, in part, a news story about a new book and why it matters. She is a consumer advocate, giving the reader enough information to decide whether to buy the book. At times – as we saw recently in the discussion of Jonathan Franzen's «Freedom» – she is a social commentator, trying to determine what the success (or failure) of a particular book says about America at large, how the nation lives or thinks or imagines.

In this way, the role of the critic can shade into that of the public intellectual, and of course many great critics have been intellectuals, too. (So have many novelists and poets – look at George Eliot and T. S. Eliot.) Trilling wrote about Jane Austen, but also about the Kinsey Report; Kazin wrote about Blake, but also about John F. Kennedy. This kind of widening of the purview of criticism is natural, because thinking about literature eventually means thinking about society and politics. For Matthew Arnold, the inability of his contemporaries to write in what he called the «grand style» led him to a general critique of Victorian society, which he saw as addicted to materialism and utilitarianism.

I'm not sure if anyone is writing this kind of criticism today – certainly, the most admired literary critics aren't – and the reason is probably the one Kazin cited: «the growing assumption that literature cannot affect our future, that the future is in other hands». This development, whose beginnings he saw 50 years ago, has now come to pass. It is difficult to recapture the old sense, which Arnold had, that the literary critic is the critic par excellence, that the study of literature gives you the best vantage point from which to understand an entire society.

Perhaps this loss of centrality accounts for my own inclination to put the emphasis in the phrase «literary criticism» on the first word, not the second. If you are primarily interested in writing, then you do not need a definite or immediate sense of your audience: you write for an ideal reader, for yourself, for God, or for a combination of the three. If you want criticism to be a lever to move the world, on the other hand, you need to know exactly where you're standing – that is, how many people are reading, and whether they're the right people. In short, you must worry about reaching a «general

audience», with all the associated worries about fragmentation, the decline of print, and the rise of the Internet and its mental groupuscules.

Like everyone, I wonder whether a general audience, made up of what Virginia Woolf called «common readers», still exists. If it does, the readership of The New York Times Book Review is probably it. But measured against the audience for a new movie or video game, or against the population as a whole, even the Book Review reaches only a niche audience. Perhaps the only difference between our situation and Arnold's is that in Victorian England, the niche that cared about literature also happened to constitute the ruling class, while in democratic, mass-media America, the two barely overlap.

What this displacement takes from the critic in terms of confidence and authority, it perhaps restores to him in terms of integrity and freedom. Or maybe it's just that, as a poet, I am all too used to making excuses for the marginality of a kind of writing that I continue to feel is important. Whether I am writing verse or prose, I try to believe that what matters is not exercising influence or force, but writing well – that is, truthfully and beautifully; and that maybe, if you seek truth and beauty, all the rest will be added unto you.

Text 5
Translating the Code Into Everyday Language
By SAM ANDERSON

Sam Anderson is the book critic for New York magazine. His work has also appeared in Slate, The American Scholar, Creative Nonfiction, The Oxford American and «The Best Technology Writing 2010». In 2007, he won the National Book Critics Circle's Balakian Citation for Excellence in Reviewing. He posts the best sentence he reads every day at twitter.com/shamblanderson.

I tend to shy away from big, sweeping, era-defining statements. It's the fastest possible way to be wrong about the world, and usually just an excuse for various forms of sloppy thinking: cherry-picking, scapegoating, doomsaying, fear-mongering, sandbagging, arm-twisting, wool-gathering, leg-pulling. And yet it would be hard to dispute that over the last 5 or 10 years, the culture's relationship to time has changed pretty drastically. The shift is so obvious that it's boring, by now, even to name the culprits: Google, blogs, texting, tweets, iPhones, Facebook – a little army of tools that have given rise to (and grown out of) radically new habits of attention. Many of us are now addicted, on the dopamine-receptor level, to a moment-by-moment experience of life that's defined by a behavior sometimes

referred to as «time slicing»: jumping every few seconds between devices or windows or tabs, constantly swiveling the periscope of our attention around and around the horizon to see where the latest relevant data-burst might come from.

Whether this shift is good or bad or neutral is a cripplingly complex question, and very hard to discuss without falling into clichés about the Death of Literature and the Extinction of Humanity and How Google Is Stealing Everybody's Grandmother's Favorite Jewelry. (It helps to remember, when you start having these thoughts, that every era in the history of humanity has lamented the rise of whatever technology it happened to see the rise of.)

What we can say, for sure, is that sustained exposure to the Internet is changing the way many readers process the written word. Texts are shorter and more flagrantly interconnected, with all kinds of secret passageways running into and out of one another. This has already changed the way we produce, read, share and digest our writing. Inevitably, it will also redefine what it means to practice book criticism, at least for those of us who aspire to write for something like a general audience.

I like to think of the new world order (the iPocalypse, whatever) not as a threat to criticism – or not only as a threat – but as an opportunity. It will cure critics, of necessity, of some of our worst habits. For one thing, we can no longer take readers' interest for granted. This should create a healthy sense of urgency – it should prevent critics, in other words, from producing the kind of killingly dull reviews that seem intended for someone trapped in a bus shelter during a giant rainstorm, circa 1953. This is not an approach we can get away with today, when every reader is half a second away from doing 34,000 other things. We have to work harder to justify our presence on the page, our consumption of readers' increasingly precious attentional units. This means writing with more energy, more art, more conviction, more excitement and a deeper sense of personal investment. It means returning to fundamental questions: What is literature? Why do we read it at all? What happens if we don't? The contemporary critic has to be an evangelist – implicitly or explicitly – not just for a particular book or author, but for literary experience itself.

Why, then, do we read? There's something Buddhist about literary reading, as I understand it – you drop yourself into a little pocket of silence and peace and allow magical things to happen to your consciousness. I read, on the most basic level, because it makes me happy. It calms my brain down. My wife and I sometimes refer to this as «textual healing»: if I'm in a wretched mood, feeling oppressed by the world, I can go off with a book for an hour and suddenly be myself again. This practice, if you're receptive to

it, can come to define your life – can come in fact to seem like the very definition of a rich life. (Pound: «Man reading should be man intensely alive. The book should be a ball of light in one's hand»). If our era needs to learn that lesson, or to relearn it, the book critic is in the best possible position to teach it.

To function as an evangelist, the critic needs, above all else, to write well. A badly written book review is worse than a badly written political speech or greeting card or poem; a badly written review is self-canceling, like a barber with a terrible haircut. The best way to establish critical authority is to demonstrate, in your own prose, a vitality at least equivalent to that of the book you're writing about. There are other ways to do it, but that's the most immediately convincing.

If we want criticism to matter today, we have to treat it with more respect. This means abandoning the notion that it's just hack work or service journalism or literary bookkeeping, or a sad little purgatory for people who haven't managed to succeed as novelists. Book criticism, done well, is an art of its own, with its own noble canon and creative challenges and satisfactions. In fact, it's one of the essential literary arts, a singular genre in which a lot of great writers have done their best work.

Martin Amis, one of my reviewing heroes, made an apt comment once about the special nature of book criticism: he said that art critics, when they review art shows, don't paint pictures about those shows, film critics don't review movies by making movies about them and music critics don't review concerts by composing symphonies. «But», he said, «when you review a prose-narrative, then you write a prose-narrative about that prose-narrative». This is the magic, and the opportunity, of the form. In reviewing a book, we respond artfully to a work of art in its own medium. We write words about words – and then, as the conversation progresses, we write words about words about words about words. Our work is a kind of ground zero of textuality, in which one text converges on another text to create a third, hybrid, ultratext. This self-reflexiveness doesn't make critical writing secondary or parasitic, as critics of the critics have said for centuries: it makes it complex and fascinating and exponentially exciting. It reminds me of Aristotle's description of the mind of God, an apparatus so divinely perfect it can think only of itself: «Its thinking is a thinking on thinking».

As book critics, our writing is a writing on writing. We respond to an author's metaphors with countermetaphors; we criticize or praise a story by telling a story about it. My favorite work is always that which allows itself to imaginatively intermingle with its source text – to somehow match or channel or negate the energy of the text that inspired it. It can be imitative, competitive or collaborative; it can mimic or mock or scramble or

counterbalance the tone of the source. It can be subtle or overt. But it will always have this doubled-over, creative quality: one memorable writer responding, in memorable writing, to another.

Thomas Carlyle, in 1831, warned of what he saw as the increasing self-consciousness of the world of letters: «By and by it will be found that all Literature has become one boundless self-devouring Review». He meant this as a nightmare scenario, but I've always found it exciting. Because isn't that what the greatest works of literature always are? Isn't «Ulysses» a boundless, self-devouring review of the «Odyssey», »Hamlet», »Madame Bovary» and even Carlyle himself? And isn't «Molloy» a boundless, self-devouring review of «Ulysses»? Isn't «Infinite Jest» a boundless, self-devouring review of «Ulysses» and «Molloy» and «JR» and «Gravity's Rainbow» and «White Noise»? The membrane between criticism and art has always been permeable. That's one of the exciting things that books do: they talk to other books.

The critic's job is to help amplify that conversation. We make the whispered parts of it audible; we translate the coded parts into everyday language. But critics also participate actively in that conversation. We put authors who might never have spoken in touch with each other, thereby redefining both. We add our own idiosyncratic life experiences and opinions and modes of expression – and in doing so, fundamentally change the texts themselves. Balzac's «Sarrasine» is a new book, or set of books, now that Barthes has written «S/Z». »A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man» is radically redefined by Hugh Kenner's «Dublin's Joyce». Updike's career is a different thing in the wake of Nicholson Baker's «U and I». Catullus is a different poet after Anne Carson's «Nox». In the grand game of intertextuality – which is, after all, the dominant and defining game of the Internet era – critics are not just referees: they're equal players.

Text 6
From the Critical Impulse, the Growth of Literature
By ELIF BATUMAN

Elif Batuman is a staff writer for The New Yorker and currently lives in Istanbul, where she is writer-in- residence at Koc University. She is the author of «The Possessed: Adventures With Russian Books and the People Who Read Them», and has written for The New York Times Magazine, Harper's Magazine, The London Review of Books and n+1, where she is senior writer. She is the recipient of a Rona Jaffe Writers' Award and a Whiting Writers' Award.

«Your judgment . . . is true, but not all of it», Tolstoy once wrote to the critic N. N. Strakhov, who had shared with the writer some comments on «Anna Karenina». »That is, it is all true, but what you have expressed does not express all that I meant. . . . It is one of the true things that can be said. If I wanted to express in words all that I meant to express by the novel, then I should have to write the same novel as I have written all over again».

These lines encapsulate the reasons why, in my youth, I did not see the point of criticism. To say what «Anna Karenina» was «about» would be, at best, to say «one of the true things that can be said» – and, when it came to a work of art, was a partial truth any better than an untruth? If Tolstoy had wanted to say something about some nonnarrative issue – the «woman question», for example – he would surely have found a more straightforward way of doing it than by recounting the parallel love lives of Levin, a fictional gentleman farmer, and Anna, the sister-in-law of Levin's sister-in-law. Furthermore, we read Tolstoy not because he was a great thinker on the woman question, but because he was a great novelist. Wasn't trying to criticize «Anna Karenina» analogous to hiring a master chef to wash your car?

I was immediately convinced by Tolstoy's claim that the only accurate, and thus really truthful, interpretation of «Anna Karenina» was a word-for-word retelling; and, since «Anna Karenina» already existed with 100 percent word-for-word accuracy, what use was Strakhov? Who cared what Strakhov thought Tolstoy meant, when Tolstoy himself had put an enormous amount of time and effort into writing down precisely what he meant?

The one text that most changed my opinion on criticism was probably Freud's «Interpretation of Dreams», which I read in college. I was deeply struck by the idea that certain facts about our lives are only ever articulated in the form of fictional stories – stories whose plots are related only in the most complex and unapparent ways to the essentially nonnarrative concerns they express. What if novels worked like that, too? What if the story of Levin and Anna was the only possible means for Tolstoy to express some content completely different from, and only elliptically related to, this story – content about, say, the role of women in Russian society, or the generic inadequacies of the French novel, or the existential implications of the steam engine, and above all about the ambiguous thoughts and feelings produced by these phenomena in someone like Tolstoy?

In fact, Freud has an answer for every one of the objections implicit in Tolstoy's letter to Strakhov. He concedes, for example, the incompleteness of interpretation – «Even if the solution seems satisfying and flawless», he writes, «it still always remains possible that there is a further meaning» –

but without concluding, as Tolstoy does, that interpretation is therefore unproductive or unnecessary. For Freud, the multiplicity of satisfying explanations (over-determination) is characteristic of how dreams express content: namely, through displacements, substitutions and condensations, the logic of which can be revealed only by faithfully retracing the component words and images.

My own strongest initial objection to criticism was related to the idea that «Anna Karenina» cannot be summarized but only restated. On a basic level, a novel, unlike an epic or a myth, is essentially made up of the contingent stuff of life and language: turns of phrase, conversations, digressions, descriptions, subplots. This stuff is essential to the novel. If you like «Anna Karenina», chances are that's what you like. But how can it be interpreted? It seemed to me that the novel had at its core a dense mimetic and linguistic tissue that could never point outside itself.

Freud, however, shows a way to assimilate the most contingent and arbitrary mimetic details into the realm of meaning. Analyzing a dream about a botanical monograph, for example, he determines that the flower-related theme originated in some trivial events of the previous day – a run-in with a certain Professor Gärtner, whose wife was «in blooming health», and with whom Freud discussed a patient called Flora – and was then exploited, through a series of highly ingenious associations, to express some more emotionally charged, and essentially nonhorticultural, concerns. But how, Freud then asks, can the correct explanation of a dream hinge on something so fragile as a chance encounter? How important or real could the dream's «meaning» be, if its expression depended on such contingencies? What if Professor Gärtner had been abroad, or the patient's name hadn't been Flora? The answer is that the dream would have found different scraps of experience to communicate the same underlying concern: a simple task, given the richness of language and the resourcefulness of the human mind. This observation made me realize for the first time how the vast incidental material of a novel could be simultaneously arbitrary and meaningful. Although any passage in a novel is dictated to some extent by chance, and could easily have come out differently, it is nonetheless fair game for interpretation.

The final objection solved for me by Freud, regarding criticism, is the question of beauty. Beauty is surely the defining property of literature – but what can criticism do with it? Doesn't it invariably leave beauty to one side like a pile of indigestible fibers? To approach the question from a different angle: If literature is a vehicle for some other content, why doesn't it express that content more efficiently? Why the surplus value of beauty? Is beauty just «a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down»? If that's

what you have to believe to be a critic, then who wants any part of it? Freud shows that beauty isn't a surplus value at all. It isn't superimposed onto content like icing on a cake. Rather, aesthetic features almost always indicate a hidden level of meaning, a richness of signification, which is itself the very thing that we perceived as beauty to begin with. «A beautiful dream and no indiscretion – do not coincide», Freud wrote, and the same may be said of beauty and meaning. In other words, the precise features that make «Anna Karenina» a work of art, and not some kind of a treatise, may be signs that interpretation is not just possible, but necessary.

Freud's critics sometimes accuse him of being an enemy of beauty. Isn't he basically telling dreamers and artists that their «beautiful» creations are insufficient without his «rational» explanations? Thus Susan Sontag disclaimed interpretation as «the revenge of the intellect upon art». To me, however, Freud's method invariably draws still more beauty and richness from the dream. The dreamer emerges, not as a collection of biologic urges, but as the mastermind capable of creating such a nuanced, intricate and meaning-laden world.

I should clarify that I am not proposing a literal equivalence between criticism and psychoanalysis, or between novels and dreams. That is the error made in much so-called psychoanalytic criticism, which treats literature as a facade concealing some latent, usually unpleasant truth about the writer's sexual development. A more productive and more faithful (albeit less literal) application of Freud's theory to literature may be found in Marxist criticism, which searches the work of art for signs not of the writer's personal sexual history, but of history itself. Literature viewed in this way becomes a gigantic multifarious dream produced by a historical moment. The role of the critic is then less to exhaustively explain any single work than to identify, in a group of works, a reflection of some conditioned aspect of reality.

Much as there are things about our own life stories that we can learn only from the systematic study of our dreams, there are things about the human condition that we can learn only from a systematic study of literature. I will conclude these thoughts with two examples of critical texts that I think use literature in this way.

I'll start with one of the critical texts that left a particularly strong impression on me in graduate school: Fredric Jameson's «Marxism and Form» (1971). I still remember how moved I was by Jameson's description, in a passage on Proust, of the Guermantes salon – a world utterly devoted to «interpersonal relationships, to conversation, art, . . . fashion, love» – as a «distorted» reflection of the Marxist Utopia: «a world in which alienated labor will have ceased to exist, in which man's struggle with the external

world and with his own mystified and external pictures of society will have given way to man's confrontation with himself». In fact, Jameson continues, Proust's beloved Saint-Simon produced much the same kind of distorted reflection in his memoir of life in the court of Louis XIV: «a kind of harem of genuinely human existence within the brutalities of Baroque absolutism». Perhaps, then, gossip – «that meeting place of conversation and art, that profoundly fertile vice» of Saint-Simon, Balzac and Proust – is itself a «distorted figure of that passion for the human in its smallest details which will be ours in the transfigured society».

I love this passage, because it finds such a simultaneously meaningful and absurd justification for Proust's worship of the aristocracy: that leisure class was, for better or worse, Proust's only available «source of concrete images» of the classless Utopia. So Proust wasn't just a snob! – or, more accurately, that's what snobbism was all along: an expression, like gossip, of the striving for a genuinely human existence. A bad Marxist interpretation would reduce «In Search of Lost Time» to a manifesto; a good Marxist interpretation can show how the same fantasy that led to, say, Russian Futurist poetry – to Mayakovsky's dream of a world in which Stalin would «report in the name of the Politburo about the production of verse» – also manifested itself to Proust in the interpersonal hive of Versailles.

«Marxism and Form» is a classic text written about classic texts. For my second example I have chosen a different but equally important kind of critical work: a negative book review. Marco Roth's recent essay for n+1 titled «Rise of the Neuro-novel» is one of the best negative book reviews I have read this year. Roth opens with a chronological list of Anglo-American novels with neurological-pathological premises, starting in 1997: Ian McEwan's «Enduring Love» (de Clérambault's syndrome), Jonathan Lethem's «Motherless Brooklyn» (Tourette's syndrome), Mark Haddon's «Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time» (autism), Richard Powers's «Echomaker» (facial agnosia, Capgras syndrome), Rivka Galchen's «Atmospheric Disturbances» (again Capgras syndrome), John Wray's «Lowboy» (paranoid schizophrenia) and so on.

To me, this is what valuable criticism often looks like: a pile of literary-historical instances – neuronovels written between 1997 and 2009; French writers whose work was powered by gossip – followed by a historical explanation. Roth's historical explanation is that the neuronovel represents the fate of the psychological novel in an age when psychology has been replaced by cognitive science. Literary language itself now demands a pathologic justification, such that one of McEwan's neuro-narrators, having

fancily likened silence to paint, adds, «This synesthesia must have been due to my disorientation».

It's as if, having devoured too many books about evolutionary psychobiology and hard-wired behaviors, Anglo-American culture fell asleep and dreamed a giant dream that Mrs. Dalloway had Gerstmann's syndrome. This is, according to Roth, a bad dream. The outcome of the neuronovel, being biologically determined, has no meaning in terms of «irony or fate or comeuppance»; it has nothing to teach us, apart from medical-textbook symptoms. Meanwhile, the privileging of clinical accuracy frustrates the reader's meaning-making impulse to generalize from the exceptional (pathological) to the universal (normal). If it's true that on some level «we all suspect our loved ones of being impostors», Roth asks, «how can it be that some people have Capgras syndrome and most do not?»

Negative criticism is particularly exciting, not only because of schadenfreude, but because once limitations are identified, we glimpse how to transcend them. Learning the shortcomings of today's neuronovel, we catch sight of the psychological novel of the future: a novel expressive of the problems we have now, including the encroachment of cognitive science into the concept of the self. When this novel appears, it will be because some people wrote neuronovels and books like «Proust Was a Neuroscientist» and others identified the ways in which these works captivated us but failed to describe human existence.

The first modern novel was already a product, even an expression, of negative criticism: «Don Quixote» contains a quite explicit critique of the chivalric romance and its insufficiency to account for the way real life feels when you get up in the morning in 17th-century Spain. Cervantes dreamed a distorted dream of «Amadis of Gaul», in which the giants had all been turned into windmills – and the novel was born. It's to this kind of critical impulse that we owe the growth of literature.