The New Criterion at 30

Announcing our anniversary season.

With this special expanded issue, The New Criterion begins its thirtieth season as a monthly review of culture and the arts. This is a significant accomplishment for any serious monthly; for one that has been as outspoken and heterodox as The New Criterion, arriving at a thirtieth anniversary is nothing short of extraordinary. Just how extraordinary is suggested by a historical marker: The New Criterion was named after and in many respects was inspired by T. S. Eliot’s magazine, The Criterion, one of the most influential “little magazines” of the last century. Begun in 1922, it oscillated between monthly and quarterly publication, underwent a couple of name changes (for a brief spell, it was even called The New Criterion) before closing its doors for good in 1939 after seventeen years.

As we’ve noted in this space on the occasion of past anniversaries, The New Criterion was created to resuscitate some of the critical virtues Eliot sought to foster. We have endeavored to provide a home for vigorously written cultural criticism while also building an institution of critical dissent. The two go together. At a time when culture and intellectual life are everywhere beholden to the imperatives of political correctness, even insisting on clear prose seems a daring provocation. (We think of the disciple of the French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida who declared that “unproblematic prose” and “clarity” were “the conceptual tools of conservatism.”) Similarly, simply telling the truth about a whole host of controversial subjects is regarded as a challenge to the reigning pieties of established opinion. From its inaugural issue in September 1982, The New Criterion has sought to provide a home for cultural criticism that was intelligent but not academic, vividly written but not trendy, passionate but not ideological—a mode of criticism, in other words, that has been forsaken as politically invidious by the principal organs of left-liberal thought.
Again, we think of Eliot. Looking back in the mid-1940s to the creation of *The Criterion*, Eliot wrote that he and his colleagues intended it to be partly a means of fostering “common concern for the highest standards of both thought and expression” and partly a means of discharging “our common responsibility . . . to preserve our common culture uncontaminated by political influences.” In this respect, too, we have aspired to make *The New Criterion* live up to Eliot’s ambition.

This is how we assessed the situation in our initial statement in September 1982:

Today, more often than not, the prevailing modes of criticism have not only failed to come to grips with such tasks, they have actually come to constitute an obstacle to their pursuit. A multitude of journals of every size and periodicity—quarterlies, monthlies, fortnightlies, weeklies, and even the daily papers to the extent that they concern themselves with matters of the mind—lavishes upon the life of culture a vast amount of attention. Yet most of what is written in these journals is either hopelessly ignorant, deliberately obscurantist, commercially compromised, or politically motivated. Especially where the fine arts and the disciplines of high culture are concerned, criticism at every level—from the daily newspaper review of a concert or a novel to the disquisitions of critics and scholars in learned journals—has almost everywhere degenerated into one or another form of ideology or publicity or some pernicious combination of the two. As a result, the very notion of an independent high culture and the distinctions that separate it from popular culture and commercial entertainment have been radically eroded. Far from resisting this erosion, criticism has lately been responsible for hastening it on its
downward course. Not only have our critics assisted in blurring the kinds of distinctions that were once fundamental to their vocation. In many cases they have openly celebrated the demise of such distinctions.

This fateful collapse in critical standards—and in the very idea of critical disinterestedness—is only a part, of course, of a more general cultural drift that has brought some woeful consequences in its wake. It has changed, and changed very much for the worse, the way the arts and the humanities are now studied in our universities. It has changed the way art museums and other cultural institutions now conceive of their programs and priorities—and indeed, the very reason for their existence. It plays a role in the way government agencies, private foundations, and corporate sponsors dispense funds for cultural projects. In many cases it has condemned true seriousness to a fugitive existence even in realms, such as the world of scholarship, where it was once
of course, the world has changed a good deal—changed, in some respects, fundamentally—since these words were written. Developments as disparate as the fall of the Soviet empire, the rise of Islamofascism, the global economic crisis, and the communications revolution wrought by the internet have irrevocably altered the political and cultural landscape, while advances in genetic engineering and other technologies confront our morally depleted society with urgent but unanswered questions about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What has not changed, however, is the fact that the “conditions of artistic and intellectual life in this country” make it extremely difficult “for the voice of informed intelligence to make itself heard, and almost impossible for it to prevail.” In this sense, we believe, the task of The New Criterion in nurturing true seriousness is even more exigent today than it was in 1982.

As The New Criterion embarks on its fourth decade of publication, it seems appropriate to commemorate our commitment to the civilizing values of informed criticism. We are therefore inaugurating a special year-long series of essays under the rubric “Future Tense: The Lessons of Culture in an Age of Upheaval.” Many observers assure us that we are living through one of those “world historical moments” that Hegel talked about: a plastic moment when many of our traditional assumptions about the shape and future of our culture are suddenly in play. The Pax Americana of the last fifty or sixty years looks oddly fragile now, and our expectations about the economy and America’s role in the world may well be challenged in fundamental ways in the coming decades.

In “Future Tense,” we step back to reflect on where we are as a culture: to meditate not only on the many challenges we face but also on some traditional sources of strength that we may have unfairly neglected or underestimated. Our aim is partly to provide a cultural pathologist’s report on America and the West’s recent trajectory, but also to provide some tonic admonitory counsel about recapturing the civilizational vitality that seems in many respects to have ebbed away. Below, we publish the first installment, “America Resumed: 9/11 Remembered,” by the distinguished architectural critic Michael J. Lewis. September 2011 is of course not only the happy thirtieth anniversary of The New Criterion; it is also the solemn tenth anniversary of al Qaeda’s terrorist attacks on America and the West. Mr. Lewis provides a masterly review of America’s cultural response to this enormity.

Future Tense” will include essays by Anthony Daniels, Andrew Roberts, Victor Davis Hanson, Charles Murray, Andrew C. McCarthy, Kevin D. Williamson, David Bentley Hart, and Roger Kimball, among others. Taken together, they reaffirm The New Criterion’s commitment to fostering
the enabling resources of tradition, the abiding claims of the “common culture” T. S. Eliot fought resolutely to preserve.