

Joseph Epstein: The Perfect Critic

Jonathan Leaf

The Ideal of Culture

By Joseph Epstein

(Axios Press, 2018)

The release of a major collection of Joseph Epstein's essays stands as something of an event in the world of belles-lettres. And the world of belles-lettres isn't one with many events.

Nonetheless, the book's publication is unlikely to be noted in the most celebrated organs of commentary. That is because, in today's thought-policed intellectual world, Epstein is probably best known for having defied the politically correct authorities. The much-discussed crime was committed back in 1970. In *Harper's*, that citadel of liberal thought, Epstein presented an article on homosexuality in which he said that he would be saddened were he to learn that either of his sons was gay. Homosexual intellectuals misinterpreted the piece as a call for their slaying. They have responded by levying a death sentence upon Epstein's writings.

This is a loss for everyone who likes to read or think. For many years, Epstein served to great admiration as the editor of the *American Scholar*, but this is not what he will be remembered for. Should posterity regard him, it will be for his role as a sustainer of the formal essay. Some years ago, he immodestly declared that he was the only significant writer working in the genre in our country.

If he meant by that an author of relatively short articles that deal with high culture and the weightier subjects of existence, including the purpose of life and the inevitability of death, Epstein may be right. An admirer of Michel de Montaigne and Samuel Johnson, he displays a considerable measure of the former's depth and the latter's wit.

A longtime instructor at Northwestern University and part of the Jewish conservative clique in Chicago that once centered on Saul Bellow and Allan Bloom, Epstein has many of the fascinations characteristic of the group. These include an interest in Russian authors and notable respect for classical learning.

Epstein's intellectual biography is on full display in the aptly named collection *The Ideal of Culture*. Among its recurrent themes is Epstein's own lack of cultivation before his matriculation to the University of Chicago in 1956, his exposure to its Great Books classes as an undergraduate, and his devotion to high culture ever since. Epstein is very much of the opinion that possession of Culture—with the capital C—is a lifelong endeavor that enriches daily life and reflects both inculcation and determined striving.

If such nurturing of the spirit requires

continuous effort from the inside *and* the outside, then we are surely in an era when culture will find few disciples. What else can one conclude about a period in which one can easily graduate from most of our “leading” colleges and universities without having read a Shakespeare play or listened to a Mozart opera, a time when frivolous distractions are omnipresent, activities to be found literally ready at hand on our mobile devices? In lamenting the decline of serious education, Epstein sounds much like Bellow or Bloom.

I think, though, that there is another way by which Epstein’s distinctiveness comes through. This is bound up with the fact that, while he has a second career as an author of short stories, he distinguished himself in a literary genre that is fundamentally a form of criticism.

This consideration is relevant because there are always more outstanding practitioners of the assorted arts than there are worthy commentators upon them. Take architecture. One can easily name half a dozen great American architects, such as Louis Sullivan, Charles McKim, Stanford White, Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Kahn, and Robert A. M. Stern. Yet the only exceptional critic of architecture that the nation ever produced is Vincent Scully.

In great measure, this kind of brilliant criticism is what Epstein provides. Even in the realm of politics, he is a commentator upon established modes of thought, not a promoter of novel conceptions. In one of the collection’s best pieces, he tells us about the merits of the Comte de Montesquieu. In doing so, he does not offer a radical new view of the state or of governance.

One might think that his emphasis on commentary makes Epstein’s talents relatively mundane and ordinary. That is not so, and a moment’s reflection suggests the reason. To rise above the mere status of reviewer to become a memorably skilled

and accomplished commentator on an art or a discipline, one must have an excellent style and the added attributes of cultivation, background, and judgment. Since these are highly unusual qualities, it necessarily follows that good critics must be uncommon. To say something bold and original when there is no requirement that the remarks be true, well-reasoned, well-informed, or substantive is hardly effortless, but comparatively less difficult. It is easier to be John Rawls than John Ruskin.

Permit me another example. During the 1950s and 1960s, Kenneth Tynan was generally regarded as the most important drama critic in the English-speaking world. He obtained this status based on a facility for acerbic put-downs. Yet few bother to read Tynan anymore, and even fewer regard him with any measure of respect. Why? His judgments simply have not stood up.

Take Tynan’s statement that he doubted he could love anyone who did not wish to see John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* and that it was the best play of the 1950s. That was the same decade that produced *The Crucible*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, and *A Raisin in the Sun* in America; *A Taste of Honey* in England; and *Poor Bitos*, *The Waltz of the Toreadors*, *Rhinoceros*, and *Waiting for Godot* in France. Tynan wrote cleverly and had something to say. But when the critic is devoid of other qualities, his words will not last.

By contrast, the work of the best playwrights of Tynan’s day has not been marred by their want of judgment or cultivation. Tynan’s comment that “a critic was a man who knows the way but can’t drive the car” is often quoted, but it is not so much revealing as it is damning. It is far more necessary for a critic or commentator to have perspective and discrimination than it is for a novelist, painter, or composer to have them. Indeed, those qualities may even be a hindrance for artists, who need not always be conscious of

where they are going. Epstein, by contrast, is not merely someone with a feeling for words. He has the breadth of knowledge, wide perspective, and the mix of shrewdness and prudence that a great commentator must.

These qualities are evidenced in his new collection. The topics are broken up into five parts: The Culture, Literary, Jewish, Masterpieces, and Hitting Eighty. The selection of individual subjects appears not to have been especially purposeful: they seem to be those that either appealed to Epstein at a given moment or that magazine editors suggested.

In the first section, Epstein includes essays on topics like “Wit,” “Genius,” and “Cowardice.” Although more than a few of the selections are reviews of recent books, Epstein makes use of the ostensible volume he is discussing in a relatively free fashion, speaking in something of the manner of a latter-day Montaigne. In his essay on genius, for example, he asserts that none of the half-dozen men he has known who received the Nobel Prize measured out to the length of his yardstick with respect to the term. Asserting that we can safely apply the label to Dante, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy, Epstein calls out what he sees as a trend toward debasing of the verbal coin.

In his consideration of cowardice, Epstein considers a case in which we don’t use the relevant term enough. Observing that both Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. thought that displaying cowardice was worse than engaging in violence, he makes his larger point: the lack of shame now attached to accusations of cowardice cannot be construed but as a worrisome sign for the country. Without detailing the implications, Epstein observes that there were more than five hundred cases of courts-martial for cowardice during the Civil War. During the Vietnam War, by contrast, draft dodging was actively championed among the cognoscenti.

The list of names attached to the “Literary” section is impressive. Among those

Epstein considers are T.S. Eliot, Philip Larkin, Michael Oakeshott, Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Evelyn Waugh, Edward Gibbon, Herodotus, and Tacitus. Here we gain some sense of how few first-rate commentators there can be at any time. Each of these pieces is not only informative, charming, and perceptive but also judicious. Thus, in a mostly laudatory article on Orwell, he rightly takes his subject to task, noting:

On his deathbed, apropos of Evelyn Waugh, in his journal *Orwell* wrote: “One cannot really be a Catholic and a grown up.” In *Homage to Catalonia*, he wrote, “when I see an actual flesh-and-blood worker in conflict with his natural enemy, the policeman, I do not have to ask which side I am on.” (The man could be a rapist, George; better ask.)

Israel for him was just a variant of nationalism and he despised nationalism, case closed...Orwell was wrong about many things, and about some things not merely wrong but crudely, callously wrong.

While presenting his views about these writers, Epstein manages to offer broader arguments. The theme that appears most often is that of the moral preening of contemporary biographers. Epstein skewers many of these self-anointed judges of character regarding the supposed racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism of Eliot, Larkin, and others.

Epstein’s fourth section considers a series of neglected masterpieces. Many of these are the outstanding but lesser-known compositions by famous authors, such as Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy*, Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and His Brothers*, and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*. In each case, Epstein provides historical context for the work, then explains why it deserves much greater interest and reflection than it has generally received. In the case of Machiavelli’s *Discourses*, the

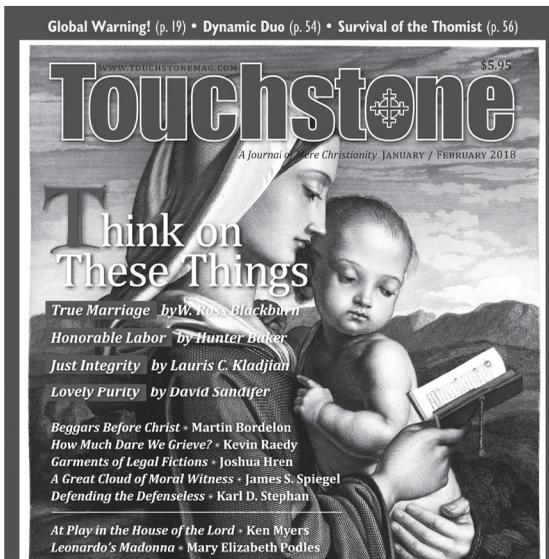
reason involves not only the work's subtlety but also its republican politics. For Mann's epic, it is appreciation of the author's vastly fertile imagination. Regarding Nabokov, Epstein begins by observing that one of the difficulties of autobiography is that its author must have had an interesting life, a description that surely applies to Nabokov, whose father was a leader of the Constitutional Democrats in pre-Revolutionary Russia and whose life of privilege under the Old Regime was followed by exile, poverty, and danger. In each case, Epstein accomplishes what Eliot said was the critic's principal task: "elucidation of works of art and correction of taste."

The Ideal of Culture is a work of rare culture and also a delight to read. Epstein's style is ingratiating and amusing, elevated without ever being stiff. In presenting his themes, he also offers a view of contemporary politics. This outlook is necessarily connected to his perspective on culture: he believes that culture must be preserved through conscious effort. This is a fundamentally conservative stance, but Epstein is not in the business of polemics. That, too, is welcome.

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