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Well-Tempered Elegance: A Collection Of 1950s Literary Criticism

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Rachel Slaughter

Neureuther Book Collection Competition

Graduate Category

Well-Tempered Elegance: A Collection of 1950s Literary Criticism

For the past eleven years I have collected literary criticism. Jean Baudrillard tells us that “the collection offers us a paradigm of perfection” and constitutes a “system” “on the basis of which the subject seeks to piece together his world, his personal microcosm.” Reflecting on my collection I realize it is an attempt to gain mastery over an otherwise chaotic reality. I am motivated to collect literary criticism by a desire to secure the discipline of English Literature. Coming of age during a time when it feels like English departments are experiencing their most severe crises of confidence, I have sought refuge in my collection—a simulacrum of an idealized past. My collection of 1950s criticism serves as an emblem of a time when English departments were flourishing. As Terry Eagleton put it, “In the early 1920s it was desperately unclear why English was worth studying at all; by the early 1930s it had become a question of why it was worth wasting your time on anything else.”

My collection includes the works by Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis, D.H. Lawrence, and I.A. Richards that institutionalized literary criticism as a genre and literary studies as a field; it includes prominent representatives from New Criticism— a major movement in the development of English as a discipline—like Cleanth Brooks and Edmund Wilson and R.P. Blackmur; and though it extends to structuralism and post-

structuralism and contains a haphazard but heartfelt group of literary theorists who address the field as a cohesive unit, it attempts to ground the discipline in literary critics fond of “close reading.” My favorite critics—the ones that form my 1950s canon—are few: T.S. Eliot, A.C. Bradley, Randall Jarrell, Lionel Trilling, and Vladimir Nabokov, along with some of their students, William Pritchard, Helen Vendler, and Harold Bloom. Many of these critics are still popular in current literature departments but to me they represent a bygone era of literary analysis; perhaps it is for this reason and not because of their unusual brilliance that I am so covetous of their work and work like theirs. Baudrillard was not the first to note that “*the setting up of a collection itself displaces real time,*” it “remains first and foremost, and in the true sense, a *pastime.*”

In addition to admiring the quality of insight and the ingenuity of method in this criticism, I often find myself relishing the distinctive turns of phrase and sense of a common experience that conjure up a time both more formal and less professional. We see it when Pritchard criticizes W.B. Yeats’s early poems: “The facility with which Yeats *runs on here*, the absence of an interesting mind engaged in something other than naming, fondling, or lamenting the fading of all things, are *everywhere felt*” (my italics). The outdated cliché (to run on) and the formal inversion of conventional word order won’t interfere with the average reader’s experience of the text; however, these qualities *enhance* my appreciation. Trilling’s famous work on *Mansfield Park*, from 1954, still functions as the seminal essay on this novel, yet it is full of phrases from its time (“a word must be said”; “nothing can so far mislead”). Both Pritchard and Trilling postulate a common reader who shares the critic’s perspective, whereas the criticism of today emphasizes difference and is loathe to make assumptions about a common anything.

In “Unpacking my Library,” Walter Benjamin writes about the importance of the collector’s tactile relationship to the objects in his collection as well as the significance of various forms of acquisition. Benjamin’s observations play out in my attitude toward my books of criticism, which I purchase exclusively from used bookstores. I am not shy about marking up my books and most have been marked up before (a previous owner of Jarrell’s *Poetry and the Age* underlined every line of his chapter “The Laodiceans”!). Benjamin elucidates the logic expertly: “inheritance is the soundest way of acquiring a collection the most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility.” An interest in transmissibility explains my desire to take notes and to read the marginalia of others, but it also explains my gratification at reading old, tattered books (my edition of Trilling’s book on E.M. Forster was published in 1943) and my desire for original editions with dated covers and introductions written nearer to the time of publication. The escape into these works, the sense of being part of the audience for whom the book was originally intended, excites my yearning but also increases my knowledge of literary history.

Nabokov’s *Lectures on Literature* and *Lectures on Russian Literature* are among my most treasured objects and those that best resemble classic collector’s items. Although Nabokov was most famous as the novelist who wrote *Lolita*, he was also a long-time professor and passionate collector of butterflies. His penchant for collecting can be seen in his novels, but his lectures themselves are full of collector-worthy rarities: hand-drawn maps of various fictional locales, annotated pages from the novels he taught, and elaborate thematic diagrams and outlines that help us to navigate the novels that he teaches. The lectures also offer a rare glimpse into the world of his classroom at Cornell

during the 1950s. They are peppered with sample questions from exams he gave on *Bleak House* and *Madame Bovary* (“Why did Dickens need to give Esther three suitors?”) and delivered in the relaxed tone of an instructor, which contrasts strikingly with his elaborate elocutions elsewhere. The knowledge Nabokov possessed as a collector of fritillary occasionally appears in the lectures too. When discussing Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, Nabokov adamantly insists that Gregor is a beetle (not a cockroach, as some translators suggest) and, as such, has small wings on his back. “Curiously enough” Nabokov tells his class, “Gregor the beetle never found out that he had wings under the hard covering of his back. (This is a very nice observation on my part to be treasured all of your lives. Some Gregors, some Joes and Janes, do not know that they have wings).”

As a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* explains, collecting has long been understood as a social process but it is beginning to be understood as less outwardly directed (a symbol of status) and more inwardly directed, a recuperative act of self. In this vein, my collection of 1950s literary criticism forms a kind of museum to an era of English studies that seems (though only in retrospect) more stable, more cohesive, more ideal than the my own. I am not memorializing my own past, but the past of an institution to which I belong. I am the first to admit that the impulse behind my collection may be wrongheaded: there is much evidence that English departments in the 1950s thought they were in crisis too; the nostalgic impulse is often, if not always, suspect in its sentimental distortions; and when regarding the 1950s we must appreciate it as a time of civil unrest and old-boys club elitism in the university (as a woman and a Jew I am not the intended audience for these works). These are not small concerns. But as I

struggle to write my dissertation on connoisseurship and collecting in Modern Literature, I have selfish, irrational, and quite natural longings for something Susan Stewart describes in her book, *On Longing*: “The collection presents a hermetic world: to have a representative collection is to have both the minimum and the complete number of elements necessary for an autonomous world—a world which is both full and singular, which has banished repetition and achieved authority.”

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