

William Troy, American Literary Critic: A Re-viewing

Abstract

This review-essay reconsiders the literary criticism of the American William Troy (1903-61), a highly regarded figure during the 1930s and 1940s. Among his contemporaries, he ranked with Edmund Wilson, Kenneth Burke, and R. P. Blackmur. At the very moment when scholars and critics were either treating literature like polemics or investigating ideas as if *belles-lettres* were as sub-category of history or philosophy, Troy acknowledged both the centrality of literary ideas and their distinction from ideas in other forms. In his writing on such major literary modernists as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Eliot, Gide, Faulkner, Joyce, and Yeats, in addition to Shakespeare, Zola, and Aeschylus, Troy provides ample evidence that he produced a body of work that is timeless, permanent, and exemplary.

Key words: William Troy, literary criticism, Euro-American modernism, arts and letters/arts journalism

1 Introduction

William Troy (1903-61) was a highly regarded literary critic during the 1930s and 1940s. This was the period of the independent man of letters such as H. L. Mencken, Van Wyck Brooks, Lewis Mumford, Paul Rosenfeld, and Malcolm Cowley—men who gradually disappeared with the boom in higher education after the Second World War. With that boom, criticism migrated into the American university, first as the New Criticism, doing battle against the old *belles lettres* and scholarly pedantry; then, starting in the 1970s, as critical theory (including, but not limited to, post-structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, post-colonialism, and new historicism), which challenged the humanistic curriculum that had been transformed by New Critics such as John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and William K. Wimsatt into a close study of selected literary masterpieces.

Among his (independent) critical contemporaries, Troy himself ranked with Edmund Wilson, Kenneth Burke, R. P. Blackmur, and F. O. Matthiessen. His work also justified the admiration of critics somewhat younger, like R. W. B. Lewis and Joseph Frank, who acknowledged his importance as an influence. Indeed, in a memoir included in Troy's *Selected Essays* (containing twenty-one of his literary articles and reviews and published posthumously in 1967, and winning a National Book Award in 1968), Allen Tate placed Troy "among the handful of the best critics of this century" (Troy, 1967: xi). Yet Troy was not so much a seminal critic as a usable one. That he should have been forgotten is the mark of his achievement; in the excitement of urging the reader back to the text, good criticism is *meant* to be forgotten.

Troy wrote about such major modernist literary figures as James, Cummings, Hemingway, Wharton, Fitzgerald, Eliot, Gide, Faulkner, Joyce, Camus, and Yeats, in addition to Shakespeare, Zola, and Aeschylus. In his essays and reviews, Troy provides ample evidence that he produced a body of work that is timeless, permanent, and exemplary—perhaps as much as, if not more so than, the work of such critical contemporaries of his as the Anglo-Americans Yvor Winters, I. A. Richards, and William Empson. "Great poetry," Troy once wrote, "impresses us

with genuineness through its concreteness, its definiteness, and the exact correspondence between the object evoked and the full linguistic apparatus used to evoke it” (Troy, 1967: 16). The same could be said for great criticism—like Troy’s. He must now assume his proper role as one of the foremost literary critics of his age.

2 The Usable Critic

When Troy was writing for several magazines, above all the *Nation*, Proust had just been translated, the novels of Malraux were coming out, and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) was not yet complete. Little wonder that criticism today seems puny by comparison. Coming from that age of great literature and seminal criticism, a figure like Troy, who wrote around a hundred critical pieces but no book during his lifetime, is easily forgotten. Lacking the theoretical brilliance of someone like Burke, or even the exemplary methods of Empson or Lionel Trilling, Troy was too eclectic for easy labeling and thus for packaging in histories of criticism. His attempts at theory were both loose and unoriginal; his most suggestive theoretical statements were likely to have been tossed off in the heat of battle, in more practical pieces. Nor was he great by virtue of extent of interest or influence: neither protean like Wilson nor messianic like F. R. Leavis. Yet Troy is eminently worth reviving, just as he was dangerous to forget.

Indeed, because of their very distinctiveness, the methods and gifts of more famous critics have hardened into tools or commandments. (And their epigones are not only lesser, they are also likely to be more doctrinaire). With his lucid sensibility and freedom from restrictive categories, Troy may prove a more fruitful model than those great critics who begin to seem larger than creative writers and have thus become distractions from literature itself. In its range and resourcefulness, as well as in the fineness of its discriminations and evaluations, Troy’s criticism is a model of excellence for his and our time. In fact, there is hardly a method of literary criticism that he does not demonstrate on one occasion or another. “The problem,” Troy writes in “The Lawrence Myth” in 1938, “is always to discover the approach that will do least violence to the object before us, that will reconcile the greatest number of the innumerable aspects that every object presents to the understanding” (Troy, 1967: 121).

Though Troy was not a theoretician, his criticism was informed by an intelligence so balanced that, where many theoreticians took up positions that inadvertently placed them in logical traps, Troy easily avoids them. Neither a mover nor a shaker in scope and intensity, when confronted with a text, he analyzed it with a firm sense of its inherent meaning and of its cultural implications, in a style that expresses seriousness of commitment clearly and precisely. Thus at the very moment—the 1930s—when scholars and critics were either treating literature like polemics or investigating ideas as if *belles lettres* were a sub-category of history or philosophy (only rather effete and somewhat unreliable), Troy was able to acknowledge both the centrality of literary ideas and their distinction from ideas in other forms. On the question of form’s relationship to content, for example—a subject that

threatened to turn some twentieth-century critics into secular mystics—Troy is eminently sensible. Recognizing that the art of poetry has always been the maintenance of the proper harmony between the sound and meaning of words, he falls neither into an irresponsible fixation on form (as found in the criticism of Susan Sontag) or that exaltation of content which characterized his own epoch—overtly in Marxist criticism, covertly in the disguised religiousness of the Southern (Agrarian) critics Donald Davidson, Stark Young, and Robert Penn Warren.

Sometimes Troy focuses on minute particulars, but always with a larger goal in mind. In a review of *Tender Is the Night* (1934), he studies the occurrence of the word “glamor” in Fitzgerald’s fiction, as perhaps a key to the author’s sensibility. With strategic brilliance, he makes use of the poetic jottings of Paul Valéry to insist that in poetry, form and content are engaged in an intense conflict with each other, on an equal plane, to produce a poem. Or rather, this conflict is itself the poem—*la forme sensible*. Armed with this subtle definition, Troy attacks the triumph of style over content in Virginia Woolf, which he rightly predicted would harm the novel’s subsequent growth. Free, nonetheless, from that specious philistinism which infects defenders of naturalistic, “content-heavy” fiction, Troy never embraced the obverse fetish: the “poetic” or mannered novel. Thus, confronted with the romantic penumbra and ironic prose style of Stendhal, he can still prefer the documentary amplitude of Balzac, showing that Balzac’s details are always subordinated to his grasp of truth.

Troy was perhaps too free from an emphasis on textual analysis; he seldom peers very closely through the lens of a writer’s prose. Too often, his intense regard for literature makes him ask it for salvation (but in this he merely partakes in the widespread inflation without which the age’s great criticism would probably not have been possible). Still, he is to be praised for his originality, which is impressive. More impressive is the enduring rightness of Troy’s judgment. He was early, for example, in taking Thomas Mann seriously and analyzing *The Magic Mountain* (1924) in a long, brilliant essay published in three parts in 1938, though it is more thrilling to see him finally realize, in 1956 (in New School lecture notes on Mann later incorporated into the same long piece, “Thomas Mann: Myth and Reason,” in *Selected Essays*), that Mann’s intellectual richness is shallow, that he is not, in the last analysis, *un homme sérieux* (Troy, 1967: 241).

Moreover, Troy’s balanced dismissals of Woolf and Gertrude Stein have become standard, as has his partial retraction in the former’s case. After attacking Woolf, in essays published in 1932 and 1937, for “limiting herself to purely formal variations on the same old dirge-like tune” (Troy, 1967: 86), he apologized in a 1952 afterword: “Since her tragic death Woolf’s work has found its own secure and appropriate place in the literature of our time. That place has turned out to be neither so small nor so inconsequential as the prevailing tone here [in “Virginia Woolf and the Novel of Sensibility] tends to predict” (Troy, 1967: 87). Honor is due Troy, as well, for being the first to recognize that “Absolution” (1924) is Fitzgerald’s finest story, but more honor is due him for recognizing it at all. It’s true that, through selfless devotion to the work at hand, Troy seldom attains the distinctive prose style

of asserted personality. Nor is he notably witty. Yet when a sharp definition is needed, he can be felicitous. It was Troy, after all, who dubbed Fitzgerald the “Authority of Failure” (Troy, 1967: 140).

Troy’s central interest was in prose fiction. He seems to have acquired his wide background, his exigent sense of form, and his passionate concern for humanistic values at the beginning of his career. He had a deep affinity for James Joyce, because of his own Irish Catholic upbringing and certain common traits of temperament and intellect. Like Joyce, Troy left the Church in his youth, never to return; but—again like Joyce—he never lost the humanistic wisdom that the Catholic tradition may possess at its best. That saved him from shallow infatuations with any of the intellectual gadgetries of the moment, and helped to keep alive his sympathy for the classics of Greece and the heritage of the Middle Ages. He was, for instance, fascinated with the medieval fourfold approach to literary interpretation (literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical), and toyed several times with the possibility that it might be adapted for the purposes of modern criticism.

French fiction was also very important to Troy for a number of years, as it was for so many Americans of his generation; yet few, if any, could see it in so wide a perspective. French literature, and behind that the Mediterranean tradition in general, seems to have been for Troy a dependable source of insight and discipline. (Henry James, whom Troy was among the first to hail as a master, also went to school to the French.) Troy was observing an Irish tradition in turning toward France rather than England. Following his undergraduate years at Yale, he studied at the Sorbonne rather than in an American graduate school; for the French *doctorat d’université*, he had even chosen a thesis topic on the symbolist poet Albert Mockel. His essays on Stendhal, Balzac, and Valéry, in particular, pointed the way, when they first appeared in the 1940s, to critical methods later designated in France as structuralist, sociological, thematic, and psychoanalytical.

In fact, Troy anticipated much that later critics became famous for discovering. He opposed Jamesian form to the “large loose baggy monsters” (Troy, 1967: 52) of the novel in 1936—quite a few years before R. P. Blackmur did so (Blackmur, 1951); and he insisted on the influence of the senior Henry James on his son’s work two decades before Quentin Anderson discovered it in 1957, in *The American Henry James*. Troy reviewed André Malraux’s *Man’s Fate* (1933) when the English translation appeared in 1934, and pointed out what others painfully discovered only in the 1950s: that it is not revolutionary or Marxist, but tragic. Leslie Fiedler, for his part, wrote in the *New Leader* in April of 1951: “And yet the *essential* appeal of Fitzgerald is elsewhere—astonishingly enough, in his *failure*” (Fiedler, 1955: 175). This was a brilliant observation when Troy made it in 1945 (in the autumn issue of *Accent*), more elegantly and restraining his astonishment, in the aforementioned “Scott Fitzgerald: The Authority of Failure.”

Myth was as important to Troy as literature in general and French literature in particular. Beginning in the 1930s, along with Burke and Francis Fergusson, he was writing a form of criticism based on the use of myth and ritual in literature. The myth-cult in literary criticism once came in for some justified mockery because it

so easily lent itself to pretentious obscurity. Yet there is nothing obscure in Troy's careful exposition of the uses that Joyce, Eliot, Valéry, and others made of myth for their very different purposes. For instance, in "The Symbolism of Zola," a 1937 article occasioned by the re-issue in English of *Germinal* (1885), Troy writes that the scene in the collapsed mine "brings us back to an atmosphere and a meaning at least as old as the story of Orpheus and Eurydice" (Troy, 1937: 66). In Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), he analyzed the fundamental patterns of the ancient male initiation rite; in *The Magic Mountain*, he found the sanitarium to be a kind of Mount Olympus. In Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* (1830), Troy viewed Julien Sorel's death in terms of the ritualistic stages underlying ancient Greek tragedy. And in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), he considered the eponymous protagonist as a truly mythological creation, with the novel itself taking on the pattern and meaning of a Grail romance; while in *The Last Tycoon* (1941), Monroe Stahr is, from Troy's perspective, the image of the modern Icarus soaring to disaster.

Troy's knowledge of myth in our time was both empirical and exact—and urgent. As he wrote in 1945 in "Myth, Method, and the Future":

If we are to be saved . . . it can only be through some reintegration of Myth in terms of the heartbreaking concerns of the times. "The times are nightfall," Hopkins said long ago, and they grow worse from hour to hour. Yet, when really everything has been said, are the most overwhelming problems of our age ultimately different from what have been the greatest problems of the race from its dark beginnings—love and justice? And it is exactly with these two problems above all else that Myth is concerned. . . . Myth provides us not merely with illustrations of destiny but with a guide to its better control and mastery—the anagogical. "We must love one another or die," as Auden warns us. In a regenerated Myth alone we may hope to find a beckoning image of the successful alliance of the twin virtues of love and justice. (Troy, 1967: 42)

For other works, Troy uses other methods. In 1943 he writes in "The Altar of Henry James": "The great works of the last period, *The Ambassadors* [1903] and *The Golden Bowl* [1904], are put together, if not like a vastly exfoliated lyric, like one of the final plays of Shakespeare. And to approach them in the manner of Caroline Spurgeon and G. W. Knight on Shakespeare is almost certainly to uncover conflicts of feeling that are more often than not belied by the overt urbanity of style" (Troy, 1967: 59). This symbolic approach to James leads him to study the symbol of the garden in James's fiction, with all its Edenic and other associations. At other times, Troy focuses not on symbolism but on literary archetypes: the Marked Man (Mann); the Noble Brigand and the Man of Sensibility (Balzac); the Man of Feeling combined with the Satanic Hero (Stendhal).

Troy was always something of a Freudian, as well, although in his later work he tended to prefer Jung. He reads a handful of Stendhal's books as expressions of the Oedipus complex in which the assertions of the superego are successfully drowned out by the protests of the id. He discusses the idea of the role of the artist in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) as one of the projections of the Freudian superego. He finds Freudian symbols in *The Magic Mountain*, including

a hypodermic syringe that, as scientifically described, proves to be identical in mechanism with the phallus. In Mann's four-part *Joseph and His Brothers* (1943), moreover, Troy relates the whole pattern of Joseph's adventures in Egypt to the Freudian description of the relations of the individual ego to the world. And in the 1944 essay "The New Parnassianism and Recent Poetry," he writes that the new poets make deliberate use of what the Freudians call "the traumatic experience" (Troy, 1944: 11) and "the genetic history of the individual" (Troy, 1944: 11).

Even as early as 1941, however, Troy had begun to turn sharply to Jung and away from Freud, whom he sums up sadly in the unpublished lecture "Man in the Nineteenth Century" as a "man of the imagination who lacked the courage of the imagination." In some other unpublished lecture notes dating from the 1940s, Troy writes further: "Freud failed sufficiently to realize that the symbolism of dreams was an attempt of the unconscious to return to a more integrated experience than is allowed the individual in the modern bourgeois world: Jung is right in enabling us to relate the myth of the individual to the myth of the tribe." In his previously referenced 1956 New School lecture notes on Mann later incorporated into the piece "Myth and Reason" in *Selected Essays*, Troy now directs his hearer not to psychoanalysis for aid with the Joseph series but to analytic psychology, explaining: "For myths come out of the unconscious processes of mankind. The symbols on which they are based have more meanings or layers of meaning than the conscious mind can ever grasp" (Troy, 1967: 241).

3 Nobody's Perfect

If Troy's learning was not encyclopedic, it was more extensive, both within literature and outside it, than that of most critics of the twentieth century. He drew extensively in his work on J. G. Frazer and *The Golden Bough* (1890), on Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno, and Giambattista Vico, on Ramon Fernandez and Ernest Seillière. In a 1940 essay on Balzac, he speaks (in reference to the novel *César Birotteau* [1837]) of the promise of the harmonization of the most advanced biochemistry with the most advanced modern physics, quotes Marx and Brunetière, compares Balzac with Meissonier and Delacroix, and contrasts Balzac with Dante and Blake. Troy's wealth of learning, together with his range of method, would have been nothing, however, without his sensibility and scrupulousness, his respect and love for literature.

Troy's primary concern, finally, was with the present health of literature. When he studied Stendhal, or when he meditated on medieval techniques of interpretation, he was looking for light on the practice of literature *now*. That is why his essays are indispensable to anyone interested in the two decades between the world wars, when so much of our present understanding of literature was being constructed. But Troy's significance goes far beyond his time: he never wrote merely fashionably; his respect for reason and form was much too strict for that. He is not likely to be fashionable at this moment, either, when the arbiters of our taste—arbiters who have not inherited the methods of their great predecessors, let alone their genius, their sensibility, or their commitment to literature—reject form and meaning in

favor of identity politics (connected with race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality), victimology, and even pornography. Troy is for those who enjoy the passionate and witty play of a first-rate mind upon the perennial mysteries of human conduct, and upon the beautiful forms that literature may take now or in any age.

In the end, Troy wrote with style and eloquence, though he could be scathing—as in a 1949 review of French existentialist fiction that concludes: “Of all the members of the group Sartre is least endowed with the narrative gift, coldest in feeling, and most expert in sophistry” (Troy, 1967: 14). In a review of Glenn Hughes’s *Imagism and the Imagists* (1931), Troy says flatly and dismissively: “About [Amy] Lowell the conviction becomes stronger that she will be remembered less for her poetry than for her berserk personality” (Troy, 1931: 9). At other times he is pungent as well as persuasive, as in his aforementioned review of Zola’s *Germinal*: “Irony is an uncomfortable mode for the doctrinaire; having blundered into it, Zola retraces his steps as quickly as possible” (Troy, 1937: 65).

I do not mean to suggest that Troy was a perfect critic. He had weaknesses and made mistakes of judgment, some of which I describe above. I think that his shift from Freud to Jung was such a mistake, and I do not share, for example, Troy’s low estimate of Hemingway’s short stories, or his high opinion of Winters’ verse. But in his hundred-odd essays, William Troy produced a body of work that is ageless, enduring, a model of literary criticism, and a challenge to us all.

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