RAISING THE BAR AND THEN ELECTRIFYING IT: THE SAVAGE CRITICISM OF WILLIAM LOGAN

by RORY WATERMAN

Our Savage Art: Poetry and the Civil Tongue by William Logan
Columbia University Press, 2009; ISBN 978-0-231-14732-3; 346pp; hbk.

> The more criticism I write, the more I'm asked to write about criticism; and, the more I'm asked to write about criticism, the less I want to write about anything at all.

THUS BEGINS *Our Savage Art: Poetry and the Civil Tongue*, William Logan's fifth tome of critical prose in twelve years. He goes on: 'then something gets under my skin', and this, for the fifth time, is a book about literature getting under the skin of one of the wittiest and most astute poet-critics of our—or any—generation. Before the opening paragraph has drawn to a close Logan is firing off a warning salvo, lambasting an individual editor for writing 'rubbish' and directing readers to the book's interior to find out exactly what the critic thinks of him and his opinions about contemporary poetry being 'too obscure, when it isn't half obscure enough'.

This willingness to fashion the critic's quill into a poisoned dart delights and confounds readers, of course. The title is funny because Logan spends so much of his time not being civil at all; his uncivil tongue must be firmly in his cheek. Moreover, he is also not afraid to take on big victims, from Hart Crane to Seamus Heaney. In fact, he seems to relish doing so. The book's blurb suggests that Logan 'might be considered a cobra with manners', but (to hold on to the metaphor and go for a long run with it) perhaps he can more accurately be described as an anaconda, constricting large prey (of his contemporaries Logan doesn't bother much with less famous names), swallowing it whole, and basking in the heat given off by the ensuing friction and furore.

Logan does not court ambivalence, and most people involved in modern poetry have fairly strong views about him:

> I've been threatened by a few poets and told by two newspapers never to darken their doorways again. Years ago the editor of *Poetry*, rejecting

> a review he had commissioned, warned me never to publish it, because it would harm my reputation. I published it elsewhere, of course; but during his tenure the magazine never asked for another review.

The critic is showing his reader the battle scars that legitimise him as a representative of this 'minor art'. An editor or reader might disagree with his opinions to the point of despair, but that editor or reader can be sure Logan means what he says. No faint praise here. Permit me to recount a personal grievance: an American editor recently spiked one of my own reviews because 'it does not make a reader want to buy the book'. But why on earth should it? This editor did not want honest criticism, but free advertising, any praise as good as worthless. Logan's praise must be earned, and earning it is astronomically difficult. Most of the books he receives are not even deemed worthy of reviewing:

> When poetry books arrive at my door [...] I look at them as I can, somewhat lazily and haphazardly, and sometimes after ten or twenty pages I put one down with a sigh and turn to another—there are so many waiting and so few I can review. In truth, if a poet doesn't catch your eye in twenty pages, he probably never will. Life is too short, and poetry books, however short, are too many.

So what of the chosen few? Included in this book are ten of Logan's infamous 'Verse Chronicles': sequences of reviews of contemporary poetry books published in *The New Criterion*. They are overwhelmingly negative, and it is not surprising that some of his terse witticisms and outright condemnations stick in the craw of respective poets and editors. After a while, one reads each review waiting for the *coup de grâce*—normally witty and always, well, *savage*: Rosanna Warren's 'well-meaning poems' (ouch) are mostly as 'conventional as cottage cheese'. Howard Nemerov 'could cram so many [abstractions] into a poem, they looked like frat boys stuffed into a phone booth'. Sherod Santos revels in moments which 'hover between sentiment and sententiousness. After a dozen of them you want to put your hand into a lawnmower blade'. A long poem by Carolyn Forché 'is the graveyard where unused lines go to die'. James Fenton is 'the best poet of his generation in Britain' but reading most of *The Love Bomb* is like 'chewing shoe leather'. The 'most accomplished poem in [Franz Wright's *Walking to Martha's Vineyard*] collapses into the same kitschy sanctimoniousness that puts nodding Jesus dolls on car dashboards', and his poems are 'the Hallmark cards of the damned'. And all of this in the first twenty pages after the introduction. Logan's reviews are not formulaic, exactly, but so many of them begin in such a way that the reader cannot immediately tell what the reviewer thinks of a book, before he drops one of these little stinkbombs—either po-faced or with a grin, one is not always certain. Quite often he then drops another,

and another, and another. But it is not the reviewer's job to sell books or ingratiate himself, and whilst we might be tempted to run from the room, or bring the critic down (or fetch a gas mask and join in), it is inescapable that Logan acts as he sees fit without letting any inimical politeness spoil the party, and can be guaranteed to get to the point (and sometimes stay there for a while).

So far, so amusing. Nonetheless, it is hard not to wish that more of this book was given over to poets and collections Logan *would* recommend. Very rarely, it must be said, Logan disarms the reader by actually praising something, though hardly in the sort of language that might grace the dust-jacket of a second edition. For example, the U.S. Poet Laureate Kay Ryan is 'a minor poet of a rare and agreeable sort'. One of the most alluring pieces in this book is an essay on 'The Forgotten Masterpiece of John Townsend Trowbridge', a poet from upstate New York whose life straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—and about whom I must confess my complete prior ignorance. Never blithe in his flattery (ha!), one senses a genuine affection for Trowbridge's minor Byronic masterpiece *Guy Vernon*. Endeavouring to rescue a lost masterpiece is, on the face of it, a noble task—though most critics' 'discoveries' amount to no more than ego-pumping or—worse—belie a desire to bolster a political or ideological agenda under false pretences, before the 'rediscovered' old texts topple backwards into near-oblivion once more. However, Logan really *sells* Trowbridge's 'brilliance' to the reader, warts and all. But, alas, it is rare for this critic to make his reader want to pick up a book he discusses. In *The New Criterion*, or *Poetry*, or any of the other forums in which his critical prose tends to appear, we can admire his standards, his eagle eye for detail, his individuality as a critic; but *in extenso* one first starts to wonder where the *good* bits have all gone, then grows incredulous. Considered in bulk, his short reviews read almost like one long, vitriolic and two-dimensional attack on contemporary literature and contemporary taste, and it is hard not to tire of so many utterly negative pieces as they hurtle past one after another. At the beginning of the book Logan writes that: 'A critic who does his job must be a good hater if he's to be a good lover, because if he likes everything he reads he likes nothing well enough'. I could not agree more. But it too often seems as though even when he does find something to love he picks at the cracks, opens them up, then plugs them with dynamite and stands back, smirking. I have not counted the occurrences, but Logan is keen on writing 'a little of this goes a long way' and words to that effect; after reading the nth wittily condescending review one feels the same might be said about his criticism.

Which isn't to say he doesn't sometimes get it so right you want to shake his hand. Short shrift is given to what Logan considers the plague of dumbing-down that has overwhelmed modern poetry. Among the poets to receive the Logan haymaker on this account is, unsurprisingly, Billy Collins: 'Collins has been called a philistine [...]. He's something much worse, a poet who doesn't respect his art enough to take it seriously'. But Logan doesn't stop there, of course. Indeed, he gets

more and more savage, funnier and funnier, angrier and angrier for a thousand words or so, broadening into an impassioned attack on so much dross that is *like* Collins:

> Yet readers adore Billy Collins, and it feels almost un-American not to like him. Try to explain to his readers what 'The Steeple-Jack' or 'The River Merchant's Wife' or 'The Snow Man' is up to, and they'll look at you as if you'd asked them to hand-pump a ship through the locks of the Panama Canal. Most contemporary poetry isn't any more difficult to understand than Collins—it's written in prose, good oaken American prose, and then chopped into lines.

At such moments in *Our Savage Art*, and there are a few of them, I am inclined to cheer wildly at the bloodsport on offer.

Logan reserves a special, sad frustration for the established, esteemed poet worthy of admiration who has let himself and his readers down by becoming 'so secure in his tendencies he can't remember when he didn't have tendencies at all'. Moreover, he sees that many of our more established living poets have become weak parodies of their former selves, and his disappointment is almost palpable. Most of the poets that come onto the radar screen for this particular line of attack are certainly writers whom the critic obviously admires, some a great deal. Discussing Seamus Heaney's *District and Circle* Logan writes: 'The things he does well he can still do brilliantly', before warning that 'If he's not careful, he'll become the equivalent of a faux Irish pub, plastic shamrocks on the bar, Styrofoam shillelaghs on the wall, and green ale on tap'. Heaney's compatriot Paul Muldoon 'never runs out of things to say, only things worth saying'. Moreover, 'There's nothing natural about Muldoon's poems now—they're full of artificial sweeteners, artificial colors, and probably regulated by the FDA'. Logan has a great admiration for Richard Wilbur, but in a review of the 2004 *Collected Poems* he concentrates foursquarely on the generally 'muddled and listless' new poems, in which 'Wilbur sounds like an old fussbudget sorry he threw out his last pair of spats'. (What a shame Logan does not spare more room for the reasons why Wilbur's *Collected* 'deserves to be on the bookshelf of any serious reader' instead of indulging in this virtually meaningless comic assault.) Geoffrey Hill's four recent books, from the *Triumph of Love* (1998) to *Scenes from Comus* (2005) each have 'peculiar gifts' but have nevertheless 'diluted a career of painstakingly crafted, close-managed poems'. For half a century John Ashbery 'has pressed the limits of the expected and at last become an expectation itself', whilst Les Murray has been 'acting like a cartoon Aussie, the Crocodile Dundee of the poetry circuit'. (By the same token Logan's criticism is often as American as a drive-by shooting.) At the heart of this is—must be—a love of putting the knife in wherever there is an exposed weak spot. But Logan is also driven by an honourable and unflagging thirst, in this age of critics and editors settling for and even lauding

mediocrity, for literary greatness. And where he finds that such greatness has come and gone, he mourns its loss.

Most of the above quotations are from the short reviews in the aforementioned 'Verse Chronicles' that make up about half of the book. When Logan puts down his mace and stretches out a while—in, for example, the piece on Trowbridge or the review-essay 'Elizabeth Bishop Unfinished'—he can be fascinating and, by God, congenial. Logan reserves a special fondness for Bishop:

> The poems in her first book, stuffed with allegories and fables, betray too close a reading of George Herbert—sometimes she seems a Metaphysical, Third Class. [...] Yet a poem like 'Sestina,' with its mournful old woman and trusting granddaughter, today appears painfully autobiographical; we know so much more now about Bishop's life, it's easier to see, as in Eliot, where the personal wormed into the poetic. Even in Worcester, the child found small, obscure delights—the pansies on the back porch every spring; the two canaries, Sister and Dickie; even the quarreling neighbors (you can tell she was deprived because the pleasures were so small). She turned the ordinary into an Aladdin's cave of wonders because she had to.

It is as though one is suddenly reading a different critic altogether. When fascinated by his subject, rather than repulsed, disappointed or but mildly entertained, Logan warms up without losing any of his customary vigour or rigour. And his fascination can be infectious in these roomier pieces, not least because they are always extremely well written and informed—and normally entertaining, too: you're still never *quite* sure what he is going to say next. Logan cares about good poetry—is a 'good lover' in his own terminology—and he wants you to care about it too. At times like this it almost seems a shame he has earned a reputation as the pantomime villain of American literary critics because he has other talents beyond hacking his contemporaries in the shins.

A lively, lengthy review of Robert Lowell's *Letters* also sparkles with insight and humanity, for the most part. Logan saves the full force of his critical chastisement (which, when not at the fore, lurks in the background like an over-keen doorman) for Saskia Hamilton, the editor: 'Her attempt to gauge the precise stage of mania in which Lowell wrote certain letters is comically obtuse'. Typically, his word choice smacks of academic thuggery, though it is hard for anyone who consults the *Letters* not to see his point. But a little more sympathy is lost when Logan uses an entire page to list mainly minor typing errors, and uncharitably suggests that Hamilton's spelling is at fault for her writing 'British Navel Reserve'—surely this is no more than a typo. (Elsewhere in this book Logan suggests that criticism is 'often wishful thinking'; his own is normally the opposite). He ends this section by declaring 'Enough cavils'. Quite. When not consumed by such captiousness he can be fascinating.

But Logan's willingness to take on an exacting task can reap rewards—for the reader and also for broader literary standards. The fastidiousness that lies behind the emphasis on minor 'cavils' in the Lowell book results in the editor of *The Notebooks of Robert Frost*, Robert Faggen, being roundly found out. The first half of Logan's 25-page review of this book is essentially a critical perspective, typically intriguing and learned as is Logan's wont in such pieces. The second half (half!) comprises a thorough and ruthless deconstruction of the editorial practices of Faggen: 'in just about every way possible the edition goes wrong'; 'the index is helpful as far as it goes, and it goes only as far as being unhelpful'; 'after a while I wondered if he possessed the basic cultural knowledge necessary to interpret Frost'. And on each of these points the author is happy to give details, lots of details. Too many details, in fact: some passages here should be prescribed as sleep aids. But Logan vindicates himself utterly in his brilliant analysis of the transcriptions of Frost's notebooks, about which he has drawn some thunderously negative conclusions: 'the transcription is a scandal', he storms, before proving with several sizeable quotations that he isn't exaggerating:

> I would not normally stake my eyes against those of an editor who had spent years in company with these notebooks; yet, having requested a dozen or two photocopies from the Dartmouth library, where most of the books are housed, I shook my head in wonder at the editor's wild suppositions, casual sloppiness and simple inability to set down what was on the page before him. (I ordered another dozen, and another dozen, and kept going.) Words are added or subtracted, punctuation missing where it is present and present where it is missing, canceled words unrecorded, and sense rendered nonsensical.

This is not the place to quote quotations, but Logan makes the case very convincingly. (What Logan's book does not provide, unfortunately, are photofacsimiles so the reader can see for himself: he notes in the book's 'Acknowledgments' that the Frost estate 'refused permission'.) It takes an astute critic of the highest rank to go to these scrupulous lengths and conclude, with several tons of evidence behind him, that 'Harvard University Press, if it has any regard for its reputation, should withdraw this edition and subject the transcripts to microscopic examination—and the final text to the hawkeyed copyediting and proofreading it somehow failed to enjoy'. And this is why we need critics like William Logan (and James Sitar, who made similar points in a review in *Essays in Criticism*): no future edition of Frost's notebooks can refuse to take the serious misgivings of this review into account. This demolition probably haunts Faggen in his sleep. And it probably should, too.

On the subject of literary theory and academic criticism, Logan wins my sympathies without reservation. The essay 'Forward Into the Past: Reading the New Critics' should be compulsory reading on every undergraduate literary theory course

in Britain and North America, not least among the conveners and tutors of such courses:

> In a literature class, the poem will be analysed, often as not, as a 'text' that mirrors the world of its making, as if it had been written not by a poet but by Sir History or Dame Sociology. The professor will employ the cryptic jargon of methods that to their promoters reveal hidden tensions in language but to their detractors tar and feather poems for the sins of another day and force very different poets to sing the same tune. To the Marxists, the sins remain those of class; to the feminists, gender; to the scholars of ethnic literature, race—they wave over poems, mere poems, a Geiger counter that detects the decaying radioactivity of racism, sexism, and class hatred.

Informing Logan's showering criticism of so many species of academic scavenger is a love—in theory at least (and if you'll excuse me)—of the art from which they feed:

> It's disheartening to see a poem raided for evidence of sins long defunct or treated with a forensics kit, as if it were a crime scene. I therefore find it hard to work up enthusiasm for the latest announcement of racism in *Oliver Twist* or *Huckleberry Finn* [...] or elitism in Shakespeare, or sexism in, well, in just about everything. There have been sophisticated and revealing studies on these subjects, but in the classroom what you tend to get is a professor who counts penis symbols—this reduces criticism to something like trainspotting.

I have sat through a conference paper on 'Queer Shakespeare', and a public lecture in which tall buildings were considered as phallic symbols of male oppression (and never mind those vaginal rooms, doorways, windows). Aristotle apparently said that it is the mark of a great mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it. Perhaps I lack a great mind, but one of the principal values of Logan in these longer pieces is that he so often says, whilst lightly wearing an impressive cloak of erudition, what I hope I already thought and would like to have said myself. In the same essay he opines that 'contemporary theory remains largely inoculated against the way poems work. In the end, it is a very dull way to look at poetry'—which is all very well unless one has a professional reason for disagreeing, of course. It won't only be certain poets and editors who have found Logan contemptible, but myriad academics also (and often they are the same people, of course). Again, I am enthusiastic to add, this makes him all the more important. He dares to say what too many others do not, with a readability and acumen the vast majority of his detractors could never emulate.

Logan has a wonderful gift for cutting through trends, or peering over a miasma of opinions. Here he is on Philip Larkin, whose reputation (as a man, not as a poet) has been dragged through a lot of dung in the past two decades:

> If we're going to call […] Larkin a racist, we ought to start drawing up an indictment of Sylvia Plath, who noted in her journals a girl's 'long Jewy nose'; or Wallace Stevens, who wrote, 'I went up to a nigger policeman', or Marianne Moore, who mentioned in a letter that a 'coon took me up in the elevator'; or William Carlos Williams, whose letters are peppered with references to wops, niggers and Jews. Until very recently such remarks were so prevalent in Britain and America, we do ourselves no credit by turning into scapegoats the writers who merely succumbed to the bigotry of the age.
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> We are no better if we condemn such opinions without seeing where Larkin rose above them, sometimes merely by exposing the insecurity and self-loathing at their heart. His poems may be the record of how a man converts his basest feelings to something more humane […].

There is a perspicacity to this lacking in Andrew Motion's otherwise dependable biography of Larkin, which sparked much of the furore about Larkin's personality, or the far-fetched, knee-jerk criticism of Tom Paulin, Germaine Greer, and many other commentators. Logan's is a point that might be made by Larkin's friends and those with a closer interest in the self-designated 'Hermit of Hull', but this critic is altogether more detached and this makes his comments all the more necessary. (They should be emailed to the author of the 'phallic buildings' lecture I mentioned earlier.)

It is perhaps strange to see two reasonably long pieces on Thomas Pynchon in a book subtitled *Poetry and the Civil Tongue*, but both strive to earn their places: the first because it deals (in somewhat longwinded fashion) with the 'poetic' qualities, whatever that means exactly, of Pynchon's novel *Mason & Dixon*; and the second because it can be bloody entertaining:

> Pynchon's attorneys might mutter that [his] jokes are never 'bad' in an absolute or moral sense but merely the projection in our 'time-stream' of a humor (call it a 'variant stimulus to laughter') in common use in the future but not yet available to us. They are therefore not prochronistic, rotting away any slim foundation of realism that remains, but always already anticlimactic.

Of course, when Logan takes on a novelist he gets out the same familiar weapons:

> *Against the Day* [...] starts in the air, high-minded as a kite, and gradually flutters groundward, dragged down by subplots galore and characters thrown in willy-nilly, as if a novel's only virtue were how many characters it could stuff into a phone booth.

Another phone booth full of flesh aching to be pipe-bombed. I couldn't agree more, anyway, and part of me wants to give Logan a medal just for finishing that book. But I'm not sure the essay that makes this point needs to run to a full twenty-three pages.

And this sums up Logan's new book: it is a work of devilish wit, necessary arrogance, insight and intellect; but too often he roots out the bad whilst neglecting the good, occasionally (albeit rarely) at soporific length. Logan thinks that the majority of writers are praised too highly and expect too much, and the last line of the volume (which annoyingly lacks a full index) reads: 'Most writers get more than their due'. With varying degrees of success and necessity, *Our Savage Art* continues this critic's quest to redress the balance.