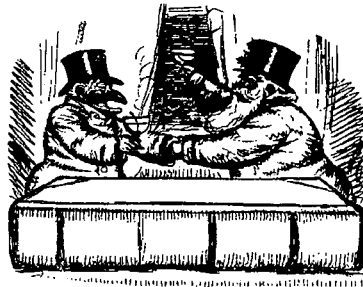


ARTS & CULTURE



C R I T I C U S

Obiter Dicta

B Y G . B . T E N N Y S O N

It had long been my belief that most people had a somewhat mistaken notion of the meaning of the term *obiter dicta*. I thought they thought it meant something like “pronouncements,” even magisterial opinions or decrees delivered from a seat of authority.

Of course there is no scientific way of ascertaining what most people think an expression means, short of professionally and expensively polling them, so I simply conducted an informal canvass, stopping one of three or thereabouts to ascertain whether my suspicion that they had the term slightly wrong was right.

Well, of course, I found out that most people have no opinion whatsoever as to the meaning of *obiter dicta*. My respondents say they have never heard it or seen it and in any case never studied Latin, so they are unable to puzzle it out. I rather got the notion that knowing the term betrayed two very un-American aspects of one’s being, namely that one was educated (and showing it off), and, worse, that one must have been educated in the days before the chief text of classroom reading was *Heather Has Two Mommies* (and hence was at least well on the way to being — shudder! — old).

Well, *mea culpa*, of course, if I may use another once widely known Latin tag that the shift to the vernacular liturgy has hastened to the verbal dustbin.

I felt as Dennis Prager should have felt (though he didn’t appear to) on one of his recent radio programs when, in a discussion of American history during the Jacksonian era, a caller frequently spoke of the “Trail of Tears,” and Prager had to inquire just what that expression referred to. One could tell he had been educated in the days when the Jacksonian era meant populism, while his caller went through the system in the past two decades when that same era meant oppression of a minority. In short, Dennis Prager reversed the Criticus gaffe: Prager showed his age by not knowing something rather than by know-

ing something that is now as remote as the precession of the equinoxes.

Well, we are all victims of our educations, if not of Andrew Jackson, so I think I can claim victimhood as grounds for snatching such fragments as I can from the past to shore against my ruin, though I think I must in all candor confess that I have smaller Latin by far than Shakespeare and no Greek at all. But one such fragment is *obiter dicta*, which means, as every school-boy used to know, remarks, statements, utterances, made by the way (Lat. *ob iter*), that is, in passing, in other words, far from final pronouncements and closer to passing observations, even asides. Admittedly, in Criticus’s case it’s sometimes hard to tell the difference between an aside and a pronouncement, but that’s a fault of character, not of age or education.

Therefore, here are some obiter dicta that ought to give readers, constant and otherwise, some mental candy corn to munch on as we approach both All Hallows’ Eve and the off-year election, which two events are becoming increasingly indistinguishable. For ease of munching, I have titled each one. Pick and choose, if you like, but the best nourishment would be to read them all.

ELITISM

It was not entirely surprising to find that President Bubba, belatedly following the *Atlantic Monthly*, has discovered the wisdom of Dan Quayle, a.k.a in dog-Latin *familia intacta*, but it was positively dizzying to find within a single week that *Time* magazine through its lately deceased art editor and Doonesbury and gossip columnist Liz Smith have all discovered the merits of elitism, the old-fashioned kind, that is, the kind that stands for excellence, for some things being (shh!) better than other things.

In *Praise of Elitism* by William A. Henry III, which *Time*

puffed in its back-of-the-book essay, is being hailed as a fearless defense of traditional intellectual and cultural standards, even Western ones.

As for Trudeau, in "Doonesbury" he continued his off-and-on ridicule of the deterioration of the American college by having the President of Winthrop contemplate, in the light of the appalling ignorance of his students, the possibility of transforming the wretched place into a High School, though with typical administrative unction as presented by Trudeauman satire the president insisted it would have to be a "quality" high school.

Liz Smith, who spends most of her time saying nice things about celebrities (her column appears in the Calendar section of the *L.A. Times*), weighed in with what was billed, in *Modern Maturity* where it appeared, as a "gritty gabfest" interview in which she deplored not only political correctness but the fact that no one nowadays seems to know the most elementary cultural references, the sort that she, a 1948 journalism graduate of the University of Texas, takes for granted.

She has been queried by her editors on who Perseus is, for example, and on many other figures from Greek mythology. Smith says that editors "don't know any archaic quotes. They know nothing about the Bible. Shakespeare has no relevance to those people." (Those people, Criticus opines, are mostly English majors now let loose on the world.) Smith goes on: "I spent my whole life thinking how ignorant I was and now I'm too intellectual for my own editors."

Like Henry and Trudeau, Liz Smith makes clear that she is no right-winger, even apologizing for having gotten along so well with Nancy Reagan. What none of the above seem to realize is that it has not been conservatism that has brought about America's intellectual downfall.

On the contrary, the right has been sounding the alarm bells on all of these cultural concerns for at least a generation and still is, as witness the immediately previous issue of this journal and the animadversions of my colleague William Allen on "studentoids." Now that the horses have disappeared over the farthest hill and are in another country, the left is beginning to notice that the barn is empty. So it is. Criticus can sum it all up with the new academic giggle: American institutions of higher education have become "Young Folks Homes."

ABSOLUTELY FABULOUS

Readers of so serious a journal as this may not be watchers of Comedy Central, but Criticus recommends that you tune in now and again to the British comedy series called "Absolutely Fabulous," and known familiarly as "Ab Fab," not merely because it is hilariously funny (though that's reason enough) but because it is politically incorrect to a

degree, but not by trying to be, just by being.

It has taken trendy, fashion-conscious America by storm, yet everyone who speaks or writes of it apologizes for liking a show with such improper characters.

Yes, it's about the fashion business, which may be alien to the average reader; yes, it features many local allusions that escape American viewers ("I got it at discount, sweetie darling, from Harvey Nix" [*i.e.*, the Knightsbridge fashion department store "Harvey Nichols"]); yes, there are some minor characters on it who speak in accents that make the most impenetrable Alabamian sound like Sir Laurence Olivier.

But, oh, when it casts its eye on cant, it can wither. Such as the episode that has an American woman (who else?) talking a cross between New Age and psychobabble ("I feel so centered, so whole, so ready for the next stage of my ongoing relationship," or comparably inane words); or the episode in which Edina, one of the two principals, has had her house filled with modern art so preposterous that it looks genuine ("And this," says Edina, "is 'Despair Descending,'" or something similar. Patsy looks at the construction, a string of metal coathangers descending from the ceiling and says drily, "Coathangers," and Edina nods, "Yes, coathangers"); or the sendup of fashion itself ("I love these earrings, I really do. They're LaCroix. They are LaCroix, aren't they, sweetie darling?" "Yes, mother, they really are." "Then I really do

love them."); or when Edina rejoices gustily when an old rival of hers who is coming to visit and will see that she has gained weight turns out to be — blind; and they all fall about laughing. And of course the two heroines smoke, drink, and, as they used to say, play around.

Best of all, one of the two, Patsy, the more disreputable one, is none other than Joanna Lumley. Constant readers will recall that a wounded Criticus walking with a stick sat in torment through a performance of "Present Laughter" in London a year and half ago under the impression that all three main actresses in the play were some how Joanna Lumley when in fact she wasn't appearing in it at all. Well here she is in full irreverence and more than making up for her absence from the play. It's already a cult show. Catch it before it becomes truly popular and they do an American version with all the guts cut out.

THE ONE PERCENT RULE

Have you heard of it? Apparently some municipalities, perhaps some states (my knowledge is all hearsay), require of corporations that various undertakings, such as a new building, set aside one-percent of the cost to support "Art." This usually results in the company's being bullied into buying some modern horror of the sort that might appear as a joke in "Ab Fab" except ten times as large



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and at hundreds of times the expense. Now we know why we see those boring non-paintings in lobbies and those rusting horrors lolling in atria or befouling artificial berms and greenswards outside corporate headquarters. How did the art establishment con them into this one?

MS.-TAKES

The clothing makers Esprit have a foundation that Ms. magazine has persuaded to subsidize a free college subscription program because Ms. is, in its own words, "ad free," (cf. "smoke free" for political correctness), so they need the support of a non-advertiser, which of course they trumpet forth in the manner of the announcements with logo-overlays you encountered in July: "This portion of the World Cup is being brought to you commercial free by," followed by a statement plugging the sponsor and product the logo is showing.

As a result of Esprit's ad-free support, giveaway stacks of Ms., suddenly appeared in departmental offices at local universities, and Criticus availed himself of a copy. While admittedly not a constant reader of Ms., Criticus is nevertheless of the view that there is probably always much in Ms. to make a grown man weep, but two items in the current one stopped even the jaded Criticus in his reading tracks.

The first was an outraged letter to the editor about a man in an unidentified firm (the writer also withheld her name) who had had the effrontery to bring a "hostile environment" sexual harassment charge on, among other grounds, that in the office he was confronted and affronted by the March-April issue of Ms. itself with an article by (who else?) Gloria Steinem enlivened with a cartoon showing a woman smoking a penis. Writes the complaining correspondent: "Is that a hoot or what?" Ask the firepersons who tried to suppress firehouse reading of *Playboy*. I say it's an "or what."

Several other letters in the current Esprit-sponsored ad-free Ms. take strong issue with an earlier article by Alice Walker, she of *The Color Purple* fame as well as a recent book on female circumcision.

Seems Ms. Walker more or less claimed that only black women were nurturing and mothering and some Ms. readers who are not black are irate, insisting that they are as nurturing as thou, or at least as Alice Walker. All that's good news, perhaps, but one of the letter-writers wrote about the matter with abundant reference to female sexual features in language that not only could not appear in this journal or in any daily newspaper or probably even in *Playboy*, but that Criticus would not utter in mixed company and would use only among the boys, as they used to say, preferably those in the military who talk that way anyhow.

Even latter-day Lenny Bruces have not been making a case for this kind of language lately. Now if there were a magazine called Mr. (Robert Bly, *N.B.*, if you'll excuse yet another Latinism), it would doubtless be banned from the firehouse for writing that is evidently the common stock of Ms. readers. Thus we have reached the point of entitled offenders against good taste. Just as only "African-Americans" may now use the N-word, only C's may use the C-word.



In a new searching biographical-critical study Brecht has been exposed as a fraud who actually stole... something like ninety percent of the works that bear his name. (Is that literary Marxism in practice?)

BREAKING BRECHT

Criticus has always hated the writings of Bertolt Brecht. His self-important "Epic Theatre," his pompous "alienation affect," his pretentious Marxism, and not least his canonization by the left for the past half-century and more have all rendered him utterly bogus.

Well, the good news is that in a new searching biographical-critical study Brecht has been exposed as a fraud who actually stole or appropriated — not plagiarized — something like ninety percent of the works that bear his name. (Is that literary Marxism in practice?)

The bad news is that he stole the writings he put his name to from various women he lived with and used (in every sense of the word), then discarded and left in penury. But then the good news about that is its instructive demonstration that

these duped and abused woman (Esprit-sponsored ad-free Ms. where are you?) actually wrote this drivel themselves, thus proving that bad writers can be women as well as men.

Of course, these women were victims of the hegemonic, patriarchal system of — er, well, Communism. Let's let the left swing in the wind on this one.

JIMMY ON THE SPOT

Readers *d'un certain âge* (forgive the intrusion of French) will recall cartoon style ads for an insect repellent that used to appear in magazines like *Redbook* and *Cosmopolitan* back in the days before they took up counseling women on how to achieve orgasm.

In these ads a woman, somehow instantly recognizable as a housewife (perhaps she wore an apron), would be shown looking in dismay at a buzzing insect and calling out to her husband, who was rushing to the scene with a long pump-operated spray can in hand, "Quick, Henry, the Flit!"

The Flit was, of course, the product that Henry would be shown spraying at the offending mosquito, fly, etc. Criticus believes that this procedure, *mutatis mutandis*, (sorry about that) accurately describes President Bubba's foreign policy.

Whether we can imagine First Lady Macbeth advising him to do so or not, someone or something seems to be prompting the president when confronted with a crisis with the advice, "Quick, Bubba, the Jimmy Carter!"

And presto, Carter is called away from hammering houses in South Central L.A. or the rainforest or wherever and dispatched to Korea or Haiti. Unlike the Flit, however, Jimmy then starts doing his own bidding as he struts again on the world stage. What is clearly needed is the revival of Flit but upgraded for the nineties. This time it would not merely

repel flying insect pests but also flying ex-president pests. At each future crisis, the *vox populi* (there I go again) would shout, "Quick, America, the Flit!" and vainglorious politicians would be gone.

Come to think of it, that's what the polling place is for. This November may see America giving pestiferous politicians a good dose of the Flit.

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BOOK REVIEW

Reagan Revisited

BY MATT ROBINSON

Since the defeat of George Bush in 1992, American conservatives pass much of their time doing autopsies on the failed campaign that drove them into the political wilderness. They believe that were it not for the bungling Bush campaign and its run from the right govern from the left game plan, the Reagan Revolution would be continuing apace.

Sure, George Bush lost in 1992 to the liberals' liberal, but even before that debacle he lead the nation back down the "kinder, gentler" statist path of higher taxes, larger deficits, and more invasive government programs.

The result is that today's lunchtime conversations in the "little platoons" of the conservative movement focus with messianic glee on 1996: *Stall Clinton, for God's sake, until we can return a real conservative to power.* To many conservatives all will be as it should be when a new leader emerges to bring conservative and Republican bickering to an end.

But this scenario is dead wrong according to *Dead Right* author David Frum. Life is a bit more complicated and messy than this simple blame game. *Dead Right* is a provocative, occasionally flawed, but always interesting investigation into the real crisis of the American right and the challenges ahead.

For Frum, the conservative failure to stay in power and effect more substantial change in the American cultural and political landscape began earlier than 1992. In fact, the ebbing power of conservatives began even before George Bush was inaugurated. Frum's message for conservatives is a painful one: conservatism's problems are deep and not easily solved.

The author describes *Dead Right* as "the story of how a great political movement succumbed to [the temptation to please the crowd] and the consequences of that succumbing."

The consequences of that succumbing are a pragmatic, intellectually-tainted conservatism that has been swallowed up

by Washington and, worst of all, adjusts its rhetoric for the fickle taste of the masses.

The author persuades the reader that the real decline of conservatism in the political realm and its increasing fractiousness began the day conservatives abandoned their war against overweening government in favor of political expediency.

Frum traces the roots of the conservative crisis of confidence to what he calls the "failure of the Reagan gambit." The Reagan plan: if we increase revenues by cutting taxes and restrain the rate of government growth, then America can afford and gently ease itself into more manageable government. "There was no arithmetic reason that the Reagan program could not have succeeded. Reagan's budgets were wrecked by the inability and unwillingness of the most conservative administration since Coolidge to resist the rise of social welfare spending."

But Reagan of all people failed to reduce government and, according to Frum, cold, flinty conservatism saw its twilight. The Reagan administration became the defender of Veterans' groups, farmers, and small businessmen. Their pork was removed from the budget cutting board and once that happened, intellectual consistency be damned, the possibility for anyone's budget in Washington, D.C. to be cut, withered.

By the end of the 1980s it was clear that social welfare spending had continued to grow and work its destructive effects. Government was expanding unchecked: illegitimacy, racial animosity, crime, and the break down of the family were only some of the problems that became increasingly visible. The utter failure of conservatives to control the welfare state which created or exacerbated so many of these problems left