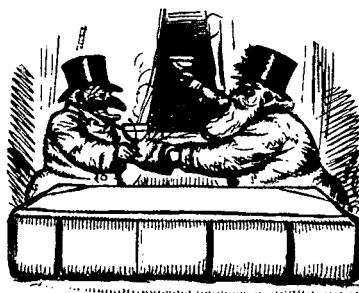


# ARTS & CULTURE



C R I T I C U S

## Be it Resolved

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

NEW YEAR'S Resolutions have their origin in pre-history. Charles Panati's *Extraordinary Origins of Everyday Things* asserts that the earliest recorded instances of making such resolutions occurred 4,000 years ago with the Babylonians. Panati is not always totally reliable in his explanations of origins — he is wrong about the Barbie doll, for example, though in this he was probably following the propaganda given out by Mattel (the true story in a future "Criticus" should there be any demand) — but he is certainly in the right neighborhood in noting that New Year's Resolutions are of great antiquity. The Babylonian resolutions were of a somewhat loftier kind than determinations to lose weight or stop smoking; theirs usually consisted of intentions to pay off debts and return borrowed items. Much the same is true of other times and tribes. An out-with-the-old, in-with-the-new impulse often came also with extravagant and wanton celebrations, followed by the resolve to improve. It appears that there is something close to a universal need to mark an annual turning point with resolutions regarding improved conduct. That being said, the differences between contemporary western ideas of New Year's

Resolutions and the ancient and traditional ones are almost as great as the similarities.

In the first place, the New Year was most often celebrated in the spring at the vernal equinox, though there are instances of its being marked at the summer solstice, at the autumnal equinox, and at the winter solstice. All of these solar turning points would have had considerable significance in agricultural societies. The springtime one marked the beginning of the season for sowing seeds, and the autumnal one marked the harvest season. Are there any among us who remember that rousing hymn that celebrates both the sowing of the seeds and the reaping of the harvest?

*Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of kindness,  
Sowing in the noontide and the dewy eve;  
Waiting for the harvest, and the time of reaping,  
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.*

The Chorus, of course, twice repeats "bringing in the sheaves," and ends with the repeat of the final line, "We shall come rejoicing ...." etc.

Yes, Criticus can sing it still, those words that link renewal and reward with the turning points in the solar year. And, in the spirit of the Old Time Religion from which hymns like this stem, we note that by

*G.B. Tennyson has for many years resolutely professed English literature at UCLA.*

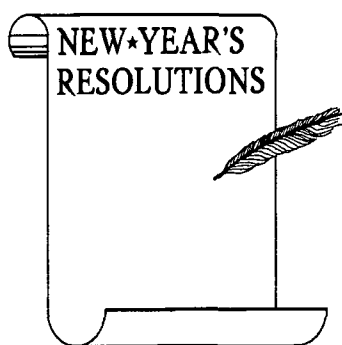
verse three the nature of sowing and reaping as metaphors for conduct is made explicit: the sowing is our life's conduct, the reaping is the fruit of that conduct, sometimes fraught with sadness and remorse. But for that sowing and reaping in the fullness of His mercy "He will bid us welcome" as we come "bringing in the sheaves."

It is not surprising, then, that most of Christendom, following Dionysius Exiguus's calendrical purifications, marked the New Year in the spring, most specifically on the twenty-fifth of March, known in English-speaking countries as Lady Day, more formally as the Feast of the Annunciation. England and the American colonies observed that day as the beginning of the New Year until 1752 when the Gregorian calendar was finally adopted by England. That transferred the New Year to January 1st, as had been the Roman custom from the time of the introduction of the Julian calendar. That in turn was the recovery date, so to say, from the celebration of the winter solstice, known as the Saturnalia and reviled by early Christians as pagan and wanton, which it was.

Holy Church substituted Christ's birthday, the 25th of December, that being exactly nine months after the Annunciation and neatly falling almost at the solstice. (Until the correction made by the Gregorian calendar the date was December 15th; see "Criticus" in the previous *CPR*.) Of course the date was arbitrary and, as modern scholars believe, erroneous. Nevertheless, it gave religious sanction to the idea of January first, the Feast of the Circumcision, as the start of the New Year and another way of supplanting pagan revelry with Christian piety. The Church also added the sombre Advent Season to precede Christmas as a way of toning down the Saturnalia.

None of this entirely worked, of course, as the persistence of New Year's revels attests. And in modern America's secular culture it works even less. The Advent season and even Christmas itself have been transformed into a kind of month-long party time so popular that American Judaism has been moved to elevate the once trifling festival of Hanukkah as a rival and a black academic changed his name to an African one and invented a so-called harvest festival he named

Kwanzaa. Thus we have the eight days of Hanukkah and the seven days of Kwanzaa and something like the thirty-plus days of Christmas. Which brings to mind the following little vignette for our times.



**England and the American colonies observed March 25 as the beginning of the New Year until 1752 when the Gregorian calendar was finally adopted by England.**

Receptionist in dentist's office to Criticus: "Your appointment will be on January 5th."  
Criticus: "Ah, Twelfth Night."  
Receptionist: "No, the fifth."  
Criticus: "I mean Twelfth Night as in Shakespeare." (Mute stare of incomprehension from receptionist.)  
"You know, as in the "Twelve Days of Christmas."  
Receptionist (in doubtful tone): "Well, I've heard the song."  
Criticus: "We'll leave it at the fifth, then."

Still, some fragments of the serious side of things can be shored against the ruins. They show themselves in such notions as depicting the New Year as a babe in diapers (an unconscious reference to the Holy Child?) and the old year as a grey-bearded man (Old Nick or just old man?); or setting off firecrackers, blowing bells and whistles, banging gongs and cymbals to chase away the old and greet the new; or the Texas custom of eating black-eyed peas on New Year's day for luck; and, one of the most engaging of all, the Mexican practice of always putting on fresh underwear for New Year's Eve (one hopes that is not the *only* day in the year that this is done). But ever along with all that we have the persistent custom of making those New Year's Resolutions.

**A**S RESOLUTIONS go, paying off debts and returning hedge clippers, albeit pedestrian, have to do with moral behavior. By contrast, resolutions in America center on one's physical well-being rather than on one's moral, let alone spiritual, state. There may be those who vow to themselves not to miss another Sunday or Holy Day in church, but the most popular resolution must be the one about losing weight, closely tied in with general matters of diet, such as consuming less of various foods and drink. Second must be the one about cigarettes, though such a resolution seems supererogatory

now that the state has taken it upon itself to criminalize that activity, going so far as posting hot-line numbers in grocery stores that one can call to report the sale of cigarettes to minors. You remember minors, of course: they may wamble about in casinos and may well be provided with condoms at state expense, but God forfend that they possess a cigarette. Ah, enlightened liberalism.

In the spirit of the season Criticus himself made the customary resolutions. A few Constant Readers can imagine what those resolutions touched upon, but for the weaker brethren it is better that they not be itemized, lest they lose faith in Criticus's guiding wisdom. Or as the radio queen of the ten-minute sermonette, Dr. Laura, likes to put it, "Do as I say, not as I did." (That was designed to head them off at the pass, but, alas, the pictures have long since been flashed about the Internet.)

**S**O, FOLLOWING the television coverage of the New Year around the world (Paris won hands down), Criticus pondered his conventional little resolutions until a loud, large voice sounded in his mind, saying "Clear your mind of cant," and he realized he was on the wrong track.

The voice was, of course, that of the great Dr. Johnson, who spoke thus to Boswell and, thanks to Boswell's dutiful note-taking, also to us in these after-times. *Cant* is a word not much used anymore, but it dates from at least the sixteenth century and was most widely used in the eighteenth and nineteenth. It appears to derive from the same source as *chant*, *descant*, *cantor*, and many others, all ultimately from the Latin *cantare*, to sing. But *cant* came to mean, first, a kind of whining, artificial way of speaking, then a jargon peculiar to rouses and thieves, then a sort of formulaic, perfunctory phraseology, and by Samuel Johnson's time (as we learn from the *Oxford English Dictionary*), phrasing "taken up and used for fashion's sake, without being a genuine expression of sentiment" and, in its most negative character, "affected or unreal use of religious or pietistic phraseology; language implying the pretended assumption of goodness or piety." As

Johnson went on to say: "You may *talk* in this manner; it is a mode of talking in society; but don't *think* foolishly."



**Receptionist in dentist's**

**office to Criticus:**

**'Your appointment**

**will be on January 5th.'**

**Criticus: 'Ah, Twelfth Night.'**

**Receptionist: 'No, the fifth.'**

Oh, dear. Was Criticus in composing his would-be pious little resolutions letting his mind fill with cant? As Johnson also said to Boswell of a certain cleric, one Dr. Dodd: "He may have composed this prayer then. A man who has been canting all his life, may cant to the last." And as the incomparable Lawrence Sterne said, "Of all the cants which are canting in this canting world, the cant of criticism is the most tormenting." Even the ever-optimistic Americans agreed: "Criticism is infested with a cant of materialism," said Emerson. And James Russell Lowell put the case with withering scorn: "Enthusiasm, once cold, can never be warmed over into anything better than cant."

So Criticus threw out all his canting resolutions and started on more high-minded ones. Such as:

- Do not discuss the dating of the Millennium any more. You have become a bore on the subject.
- Stop reading junk mail, especially those catalogues that want to sell you such things as two sets of "washballs" for \$14.98, washballs being little round colored balls of some sort of fluff that allegedly will collect lint and pet hairs from your wash, as if there were no lint filter.
- Stop reading virtually every word of the daily paper, perhaps cease with it altogether and substitute the Internet as a youthful Constant Reader of Criticus's acquaintance has done, anticipating Tim Ferguson's advice in the last number of *CPR*.
- Restrict that most pernicious of addictions, namely, watching television news with its ceaseless non-news fear-mongering — "Could your child get lice?" "Do you know what may be lurking in your refrigerator?" "How safe are prescription drugs?" "Can you trust the labels on packaged goods?" "Are you being cheated at the checkout counter?" Always followed by "Coming up" or "Later in the program" and then a switch to commercial.

- Make a contribution to the Southern Military Institute. Persuade *CPR* editor to do likewise.

WELL, I was rolling along in this vein when, lo, this time the proverbial still, small voice broke in with, "What after all is a resolution anyway?" I replied, "Ha! We all know what a resolution is, don't we? We resolve to do a certain thing." "And resolve? What is that?" replied the voice. Before I could answer, it went on: "Remember Hamlet's soliloquy? The one about the solid (or, as purists have it, the 'sullied') flesh?" Of course Criticus remembered. As every schoolboy knows, Hamlet's second most famous soliloquy begins: "Oh that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew." *Resolve* itself? Make a *resolution* of itself? Determine itself to do something? Choose a firm course of action? No, as every schoolmaster knows, *resolve* here means *dissolve*, *liquefy*, in fact to cease to be itself, even to cease to *be*. Hmm. How can *resolve* mean to make firm *and* to disappear, to implement *and* to melt away?

So it was back to the glorious *Oxford English Dictionary*. Tempering the wind to you shorn lambs, and mindful of space constraints, Criticus will not this time trace the entire path he was obliged to take through the forest of entries under the words *resolve* and *resolution* (30 pages of computer printout). Instead I will simply reveal the results of my inquiry, which I believe has unearthed a linguistic first. Those results are that both *resolve* and *resolution* are among the very small number of words in the English language that carry antithetical meanings. I consulted a cunning academic linguist of my acquaintance to ascertain the term for this phenomenon, and he told me there was no such but that he himself had in a learned article coined the term "homonymic clash." What we are talking about here is the issue of words like *let* and *cleave* and *cleave*. And an interesting issue it is.

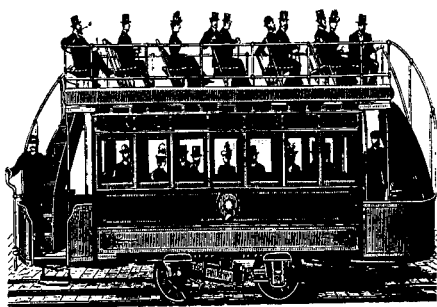
As every English major used to know, *let* means both to permit and to hinder, *cleave* means both to sunder and to cling to. Properly put, I suppose one should say that they are each different words that time

and the vagaries of English spelling ended up making look identical. Now to this exclusive club we may admit *resolve* and *resolution*. That aspect of these words

that suggests melting or dissolving is nowadays rather less frequently encountered than the aspect that means to make firm, to determine, to fix something securely. But it has not entirely disappeared, as when we resolve a problem, find a resolution for a difficulty, for we are certainly not locking anything into place, we are reducing it, melting it into something less or dissolving it entirely away. "They had a disagreement but resolved it, and now it's all gone." Meantime, the sense of firm determination continues with our resolve-words, as in those still nagging New Year's Resolutions, to say nothing of parliamentary ones, or of men of firm resolve. All this leading to such an oddity as: "I was resolved to resolve the disagreement." Just as one might say, "Othello's love makes him want to cleave to Desdemona, but his rage makes him want to cleave her in twain." (Yes, I know, he murdered her in another way. Don't write.)

Apart from deciding that this great discovery of the antithetical nature of *resolve* and *resolution* should henceforth be known as the Criticus Clash, I was also forced to reconsider that which triggered all these philological ambulations through the OED — my New Year's Resolutions. Perhaps the Janus-like character of the word *resolution* itself is the reason that New Year's Resolutions so firmly undertaken so quickly melt away. In that case, so much the better. I no longer had to worry about breaking any of mine, so I threw them all out. All save one. It was among those unspecified resolutions regarding personal conduct that I alluded to earlier. Here it comes.

THIS PAST October a buoyant Criticus, having accomplished some fruitful literary research in the City of Dreaming Spires, repaired to London where he treated himself to several visits to the theatre. The best of these was the evening at the Lyric Theatre on opening night of the new Alan Ayckbourn play *Comic Potential*. Set in the not too distant future, it is a play about an an-



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droid who becomes human. This android is one of a number of such creations who are here called "actoids" because they have been designed solely to perform in television soap operas, a nice little dig at the nature of the genre and the performers in it. The actoids are supervised and manipulated by actual humans. The leading female actoid is played by an actress named Janie Dee in a brilliant performance that rightly gained rave reviews in all the papers the next day. Much of the charm was seeing her, starting as an automaton who could be made to stand still in any awkward position, little by little come to vivid and exuberant human life, finally moving with fluid energy and filled with human emotion for her human hero. Bravos all round.

**I**T WAS the sort of play that, were it a musical, critics would characterize as one that sends you out of the theatre humming its tunes. In such a mood did Criticus emerge onto Shaftesbury Avenue and make his jaunty way to a humming Piccadilly Circus and to the bus stop on Piccadilly itself just west of the Circus. A light drizzle had fallen earlier so the street was just barely wet. Though not yet late, only a single other person, a gentlewoman *d'un certain age*, was waiting at the stop as Criticus came along. Suddenly I saw that my Number 9 bus had just pulled away from the stop and was pausing as the driver waited for the moment to pull into Piccadilly Circus itself. A young man ran to it, leapt onto the back platform and moved into the bus. The open platform at the

back of the double-decker was empty, so Criticus, android mimicking human, made a dash for it, intending to grasp the pole that passengers use to support themselves as they board and thereby to secure his ascent. Just as I was completing my run, though still in motion, and had half-seized the pole, the bus lurched into the Circus with surprising speed, my hand lost its grip, and I fell almost full-face down onto the street, slightly breaking the fall with my right shoulder which crashed onto the wet surface with fearsome force. By good fortune, it was the very last few feet of the bus lane, so the cars whizzing by on my right (remember, we're driving on the left here) were just beginning to move into the lane where I lay flattened and immobile like an android returned to its previous state.

Somehow I was able to rise up and make my way back to the bus stop. The only observer of all this folly, the aforesaid gentlewoman, looked at me and said, "Are you all right?" "Yes," I said. She paused just a bit, then said, "That was very foolish." Keeping my upper lip very stiff, I replied, "Yes, it was." A supremely English moment. We had no more converse. Another bus eventually came along, as buses will, and I boarded it with great care and, I hope, some dignity. Over the next week I watched my shoulder turn yellow, then brown, then purple, and in the fullness of time regain its normal color, though it ached for weeks afterwards.

When New Year's came around I made a resolution not to run after buses. It is the only one I am resolved to keep.

CPR

## Correspondence

(Continued from page 7)

should exhort his listeners in all their difficulties and dangers to trust in God, not in the artifice of lying; for those who have recourse to subterfuge, plainly show that they trust more to their own prudence than to the providence of God." So, for thousands of years, from "throughout the ancient Covenant" to our day, Jewish and Christian authorities have taught that all lying is wrong. Writers can be produced who disagree with this judgment, but Mr. Hines' implication that I am creating a novel absolutism about honesty is plainly false.

4) In his paragraphs four and five, Mr. Hines comes more or less unglued. The definition of a lie, as is simply and widely understood, is, as John Hardon puts it: "speaking [or writing] directly contrary to what is on a person's mind." I clearly labeled as a "summary" ... "at least as it reads to me" (which, in any case, it plainly was, with or without the labeling) my version of the Kurzweil/Horowitz dispute. To accuse me of "lying" in this is merely daft. He then calls St. Lawrence a liar because the Saint refused to adopt Valerian's

narrow-minded, materialist definition of "treasure" as his own, equating that with Bill Clinton's pretended confusion about the word "is." But of course St. Lawrence said nothing contrary to what was in his own mind regarding the Church's treasure, he merely waited three days before revealing it to the Emperor in as vivid a way as he could. I believe Clinton spoke directly contrary to what he knew. If he did not, he may be daft also, but he did not lie.

As his own sloppy accusations show, Mr. Hines' overall implication that both the definition and morality of lying can and should be stretched to suit our convenience is a recipe for open-ended moral incoherence. As I wrote responding to Mr. Horowitz: "the Western tradition ... answers such questions as whether lying is moral not with reference to personal judgment but by consulting authority. God commands us: do not lie, and provides no authority for suspending that commandment. If we suspend it anyway, even if we believe we have excellent reasons for doing so, we will find, when we go looking for it again, that the authority and the coherence it gave our moral position is gone." That's what happened to George Bush; it is why he lost, and it is why Republicans commit political suicide if they countenance lying.

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David Horowitz

Politi

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