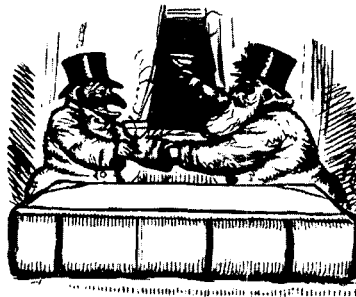


ARTS & CULTURE



C R I T I C U S

Sticks and Stones

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

Sticks and stones break only bones,
But *names* can really hurt me.

— *adapted by Criticus*

IT'S AN increasingly familiar story. Item — California Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante, while addressing a gathering of black leaders, used the other N-word in reciting a list of organizations that had the word “Negro” in them. Some in the audience got up and walked out. Item — A black minister in Washington, D.C., speaking to a group of homosexual activists, used some pejorative terms for homosexuals (actual words not specified in the news story), and shock waves ran through the crowd. Some in the audience walked out. Item — The prizefighter Oscar de la Hoya, in a Spanish-language newspaper interview about his having successfully broken his contract with his former manager Bob Arum, boasted that he had “defeated one of the biggest Jews to come

out of Harvard.” In retaliation, Irv Rubin of the Jewish Defense League on the Larry Elder radio talk show called de la Hoya a “Mexican Nazi” and vowed that his group would hound de la Hoya, picket his house, protest at his future boxing matches, and so on. Item — West Virginia Democrat Senator Robert Byrd spoke on television of there being such things as “white niggers.” Result: general uproar in the media.

What all these instances have in common is obvious enough: public figures using contemptuous terms for members of some group or other, thereby provoking outrage among members of that group and among keepers of the public conscience. What they also have in common is that within a day of their utterance, the perpetrators all issued abject public apologies. (Elder bet Rubin a dinner at Canter’s that de la Hoya would apologize immediately. Elder won.) In almost every case these apologies insisted that the offending speaker had never in his entire life entertained anything but the deepest respect and highest regard for the group(s) he had just offended. They all assured us that the language they used had never been used in their homes or among their associates, that they weren’t brought up that way, that they believe in God and apple pie. De la Hoya’s apology is typical. It reads in part: “I did

G.B. Tennyson maintained verbal purity for many years in the English Department at UCLA where he once sought, unsuccessfully, to have his title read: Charlotte Mary Yonge Professor of Victorian Literature. He serves as CPR’s unreconstructed word watcher and quondam proofreader.

not mean to insult Bob Arum and his family or any ethnic or religious group in any way. I humbly apologize to anyone the remarks may have offended I never forget I'm a Mexican-American, born and raised in East Los Angeles by a wonderful mother and father, brought up God-fearing and having deep respect for all humankind, no matter what their race or religion."

It almost seems as though there's a mysterious force, a kind of malign spirit, dare we even say without giving offense an anti-brownie (I refer to the goblin creatures from children's stories), that, instead of doing good, goes about popping insulting words into the mouths of persons who otherwise never even heard these words, much less actually used them. At least ex-Klansman Senator Byrd acknowledged that his offensive term "dates back to my boyhood," thus conceding that he had actually known the term, albeit from sometime like 75 or 80 years ago. Criticus can't recall whether Jesse Jackson used the boyhood excuse a few years back when he referred to New York City as "Hymietown." Possibly he just called it an "oversight," his current all-purpose term for his lax accounting and other missteps.

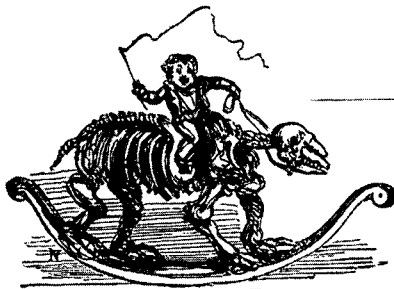
Constant Readers, and perhaps In-Constant ones as well, are by now thinking, "Yes, we've heard all this before, not least from Criticus himself, who has been shooting his arrows at the politically correct from his barbican in the Castle of Verbal Veracity for quite some time now." True enough. Not that these Critical shafts have driven the Enemy away. He remains at the gates. Indeed, the Enemy has pretty well occupied all the surrounding territory and is busy re-contouring the landscape. Hills have been flattened, rivers diverted from their courses, walls and fences dismantled and relocated, fields blighted. It's not just that the past is another country, as has been insightfully said, but the present is now another country, and the future certain to be yet another.

To dispense with all the metaphorical language, let me explain that what is striking about the current obsession with terms of racial, ethnic, and/or religious abuse is the way in which it has become a kind of new

Victorianism. Now, the Victorians have often been roundly berated for their squeamishness, especially in regard to sexual matters. The lower orders, as they were known, who inhabited such as the squalid areas

of east London with whole families squeezed into a room or two, were hardly strangers to the raw side of life. Their children could fetch gin from the pub, which had no licensing hours, and laudanum was readily available without prescription. It has been estimated that 25 percent of the women in London in the mid-nineteenth century were prostitutes, which accounts for the large number of Magdalen homes and for such antics as Prime Minister Gladstone's roaming the London streets at night seeking to rescue "fallen women" and set them on the path to righteousness. In short, not all Victorians were characters out of the novels of Charlotte Mary Yonge, a now sadly neglected writer whom even the most relentless feminists have been unable to reinterpret for the politically correct and who has therefore been banished from academic discourse.

ALL THE same, among the cultivated classes, and especially among the sort of gentlewomen who read and indeed populated Charlotte Mary Yonge's novels, the sensitivity about matters sexual was extreme. The mention of the word "leg," for example, could cause palpitations to the delicate. This accounts for the covering of piano legs, lest the sight of them naked bring to mind their human counterparts. It accounts for the almost total absence of any remotely graphic descriptions of sexual activity in virtually all Victorian novels. There could be subtle innuendo, of course, as when Thackeray has Pendennis (hero of the novel of the same name) loiter about in the area of Covent Garden, which was code for frequenting houses of prostitution. As for the love that dare not speak its name, in Victorian times it had no name to speak. The very word "homosexual" does not appear until 1892 in the translation of Krafft-Ebbing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*. As for "lesbian," the word meant simply "relating to the island of Lesbos," especially in relation to Lesbian wine, which was not a



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tribadic love potion but a prized wine of classical antiquity. And until the 1890s, when it was first used to indicate female homosexuality, the word "Sapphic" meant only a particular kind of metre in classical verse associated with Sappho. When Queen Victoria was urged to include women in a bill making homosexual activity a criminal offence she declined on the ground that no woman could possibly ever do such a thing.

THE REASON for this excursion down Memory Lane is not only to point out how drastically things have changed in less than a century — for Victorian attitudes persisted well into the twentieth century — but to note that some things have not so much changed as they have changed places. Victorian prudery about sex has been overthrown with a vengeance. Something as commonplace now as a department store underwear ad in the daily paper would do worse for the Victorians than merely "bring a blush to the cheek of the Young Person" (the Victorian guideline for what was impermissible in polite society), it would cause fainting among the ladies and rage among the gentlemen. At the same time, modern shapers of thought and attitude have replaced all that sexual prudery with another sort. This New Victorianism — and modern *bien pensants* would hate such a term — has transferred all of the exaggerated delicacy of feeling that Victorians brought to sex with an equally exaggerated delicacy of feeling about race and ethnicity. It is indeed Verbal Prudery.

Virtually all accounts of public outrage over offensive terms such as those with which this discourse began contain descriptions of the shock, the horror, the wounded disbelief with which the insulting terms were greeted. Women who want females in the military to be eligible for combat, veterans of street demonstrations, angry million-something-or-other marchers, hardened survivors of inner-city gang warfare, participants in the San Francisco "Gay Pride" parade — all these are brought to tears by "offensive" terms. They leave the room, they call down the wrath of Heaven (this is done by speaking to reporters), they

declare they have never heard anything so hurtful. It's enough to make grown men weep, as it used to be possible to say.

By contrast the Victorians had far less difficulty with racial designations, though the well-bred would of course avoid any terms thought to be intentionally hurtful, as would indeed the well-bred today (if "well-bred" is still an acceptable term). Criticus has before him a copy of that one-time children's classic, now as close to a banned book as we get in our society, namely, *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. So thoroughly has this book fallen from favor that few realize that it was written and illustrated to entertain her two little girls by a Victorian gentlewoman living in India at the end of the nineteenth century. The book is set in India, not Africa as is widely thought, and Sambo is an Indian boy. Even today the British refer to East Indians as being black. Criticus is almost afraid to mention that Sambo's parents are called Black Mumbo and Black Jumbo and that the author went on

to write *Little Black Mingo*, *Little Black Quibba*, and *Little Black Quasha*. All of these Indian characters are treated affectionately by the author and are not meant to be objects of ridicule.

One should add that the author, Helen Bannerman, born in Scotland in 1862 and educated at St. Andrews University, was among the first writers of children's literature to make words and pictures of equal importance. In this she was followed, and eclipsed, by Beatrix Potter, whose works are far from banned but are rather an industry in themselves. This proves it is safer to write about animals than people, just as it is safer to have animals as mascots than people. Of course that may change with the next tide of political correctness, if militant animal rights lovers have their way. Imagine an army of People for the Ethical Treatment of the Banana Slug (PET-BS) descending upon UC Santa Cruz.

Not surprisingly, these things move at different paces for different folk. Thus even now in Blair's Britain, which prides itself on being multi-racial and multicultural (the country is still 95 percent white), one can



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read headlines in the tabloids like "Frogs Say No to British Beef" and "Krauts Lose in World Cup." And only the other day Criticus read this in a British periodical: "... it's one thing to let the Japs build your car and the Chinks supply your cuddly toys" Try writing that in the *New Republic*. But side by side with such language stands the edict of an institution called Stockport College near Manchester, England, which has banned the use of such offensive words as "lady" and "gentleman" (they have class implications), "history," "postman," and "chairman" (sexist), "mad," "manic," and "crazy" (upsetting to the mentally ill), and even the expression "slaving over a hot stove" (it minimizes the horrors of slavery).

BACK ON the California home front, however, I am informed that Mexican-Americans often refer to blacks as "*mayetes*" and Chinese as "*Chinquistas*." The latter is presumably equivalent to the British usage cited above, and the former is said to be a particularly repulsive black fly that feeds on feces. Next to that, a term like "wetback" seems almost endearing, and "whitey" has absolutely no sting at all.

These negative terms merely illustrate what we all know — that distinct groups will inevitably have pejorative terms for other groups. We also know that common civility argues against using such terms, especially in the public forum. What is often forgotten, however, is that frequently the power of contemptuous terms has been negated by their adoption by the very groups being reviled. For example, "Christian" was once one such term. But one must tread gingerly. Only members of the reviled group may use the negative term without penalty unless and until it becomes common. They say that inner-city youths regularly and jocularly refer to one another with the N-word. "Hey [N-word]," they call as they pass the basketball. There is also some sort of musical group calling itself "Niggaz with Attitude." But, again, only those who belong have such freedom. At Stockport College they ban "queer" and "cripple," except where

"gay and disabled people have 'reclaimed' them."

Here's a further example or two of such reclamation. The current issue of the UCLA student-fee-supported magazine called *TenPercent* has on its cover

a sexually ambiguous photo of two persons embracing and in very large, black letters the word "Queer?" across the arm of one of them. Not to be outdone or even remotely challenged by that, the current student-funded feminist magazine, *FEM*, has a cover with a piece of "artwork" so graphic that it makes Mapplethorpe's photos look suitable for *Jack and Jill* magazine. It quite defies any Critical skill to describe this picture for readers of a family magazine. Suffice it to say that the illustration is designed to accompany and vivify the phrase "the-BLOODYissue" emblazoned across the cover in white, then red, then white letters. The issue is dedicated to menstruation.

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er far-fetched, such as piano legs or women riding bicycles (you can't do it sidesaddle as with horses), was that the sexual urges and inclinations were throbbing just below the surface and likely to erupt if not kept in severe check. In this they may have been prescient: at least such attitudes prevented having day-care centers in public high schools for all the unwed mothers. It has also been observed that Victorian attitudes carried a heavy dose of hypocrisy, and this too is true. There were many sexual scandals among the quality folk, adulteries, unwed couples, seductions of servant girls by masters, the famous male brothel in Cleveland Street, to say nothing of Oscar Wilde. (Note: there is a new statue of a recumbent Wilde at Charing Cross, which has provoked criticism not because it is of a notorious sodomite, as the Victorians would have had it, but because it depicts him — prepare yourself — smoking a cigarette!)

So, just as Victorian sexual prudery maintained a



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desired social code, so the purpose of all this fainting over the sound of a negative word is to insure that such words never get uttered. In this the word controllers have enjoyed considerable success, as we have seen from the apologies cited at the outset. Just lately the news services revealed that in South Dakota "offensive town names" are to be changed to remove the words "Squaw" or "Negro." Criticus has argued in these pages in the past that he can find no lexical justification for the argument that "squaw" means anything other than "woman" or related innocuous terms, but possibly there is secret knowledge kept hidden among Native Americans (note the sensitive usage) until now. So Squaw Lake will become Serenity Lake and, perhaps more understandably, Squaw Teat Creek will become East Rattlesnake Creek, though that does seem rather sinister. As for place names with "Negro" — now becoming almost as forbidden as the other N-word — they will rename Negro Gulch as Last Chance Gulch (not a very happy substitute) and Negro Creek will become Medicine Mountain Creek.

A total of 39 place names will be changed. Criticus studied his Rand-McNally to find these offending places but could not; they must be very small indeed. On the other hand, there are many large areas clearly marked on the map as the so-and-so "Indian Reservation," which is bound to offend the descendants of squaws. For that matter, why are they not renaming the Black Hills the African-American Hills?

ANOTHER RECENT strike of the word-hawks, though one less likely to succeed nationwide, I should think, is the measure passed by the San Diego City Council to ban the use of the word "minority" in city documents or discussions. I wonder whether this means there can be no more minority reports. And I wonder whether we will have a modern version of the beadle, that honored figure stationed of yore in churches and equipped with a kind of long pole, which he used to strike the head of anyone caught napping during the

service, a true wake-up call. The modern Word-Beadle could tap the noggin of anyone who used "minority" or any other offensive word during public meetings. A whole new vocational field would open up, and schools of education could offer courses in verbal beadlery.

There would be much for a Word-Beadle to learn. Indeed, I am beginning to envision a whole degree program. As has been extensively, though all too solemnly, reported with the release of Census Bureau data, there are now legally recognized no fewer than 57 Heinzian varieties of racial identity. This is as risible as it is arbitrary in that it provides no terms for various European ethnicities, or for that matter Asian ones (is little Sambo Asian?), but it does offer other racial combinations of extraordinary complexity. The six traditional racial classifications of the Census — white, black, American Indian/Alaska native, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and (the all-purpose) Other — are now joined by combinations so convoluted that one must marvel that a Washington bureaucrat could have dreamed them up. Probably it

required many bureaucrats, many hours, and much money. There are not just the obvious combinations, such as "white,black" and "white,Asian," and "black,other" (as these are written by the Census), but combinations like "white, black, Am. Indian/Alaska native, Asian, native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, other." That's one classification. If the distribution of races in someone fitting that category were equal it would appear to require six grandparents. Obviously the mixture is unequal, but in what way? Was there one parent with four racial parts and one with two? Is this concern not reminiscent of those old categories like quadroon and octoroon? Clearly those courses in verbal beadledom should require aspiring Word-Beadles to learn all the 57 varieties of classification so as to insure that no one on the city council mis-describes a member of what he may no longer call a minority.

Well, enough of this drollery. One would like to think that the Census categories will collapse of their own inanity, but being government funded they are



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likely to continue and to grow — as is the general obsession on the left with “offensive” language and with controlling our response to it and indeed to all things. We might try getting the Census to adopt one more category, one that surprisingly is actually operative in

the University of California system, namely the category “Decline to State.” Beyond that, we must strive to keep ourselves as unspotted from the verbal tyranny of the self-righteous as good Victorians sought to keep themselves from the temptations of the flesh. CPR

F I L M

Hollywood's Great Work Continues, But Not In Hollywood

B Y J A M E S B E M I S

NOT LONG ago, my wife and I — both of us film lovers — thought we'd take in a movie. She glanced at the newspaper: “Here's one about a meteor headed for Earth.”

“I know how it ends. What else?”

“Well, there's a comedy about a sadomasochistic killer who lures teenagers to gruesome deaths via the Internet.”

“Doesn't sound too funny to me.”

“Here's one about a boy whose father's an alcoholic, his mother commits suicide, and then he's molested by a priest.”

We wound up listening to music.

James Bemis, a member of California Political Review's editorial board, with this issue inaugurates his regular column as CPR's film critic. Mr. Bemis, a columnist for e3mil.com's “The Edge,” recently wrote “Through the Eyes of the Church,” a five-part series on the Vatican's list of the 45 most important films of all-time, published in The Wanderer, the nation's oldest Catholic weekly.

The following day, I wandered by the video section at my local library. A friend had recommended a foreign film so I checked their collection. It was there: a Danish movie called *Babette's Feast*. It turned out to be a gem.

In the film, two sisters on the Danish seacoast help their father, the local pastor, tend his flock of aging villagers. Their housekeeper, Babette, celebrates winning the lottery by cooking the townspeople a lavish French meal. Somewhere between the cooking and eating, the celebration becomes a spiritual event, and a paean to the human heart. It had been a long time since I was that moved by a film, in which a profound story was so simply and superbly told. Few in Hollywood even attempt — let alone achieve — anything so noble nowadays, preferring to employ their talents wallowing in sex and gore. (And, unfortunately, money.) Watching *Babette's Feast* was like being raised on rap music and then hearing Mozart or Bach for the first time. Realizing what a tremendous source of beauty I'd

missed by ignoring foreign movies, I began a quest to find more.

Luckily, my local library has a great video collection, including hundreds of foreign films. Starting with the French — for my money, the world's best filmmakers — I was dazzled by *Children of Paradise*, among the best movies ever made, relating the story of a theater troupe working Paris' “Boulevard of Crime” during the mid-1800s. Four men — all quite different — fall in love with the courtesan Garance, wonderfully played by Arletty, who is the essence of femininity. What raises the film to the level of great art is the extraordinary screenplay written by poet Jacques Prevert. More than merely a script, Prevert's language sparkles (in translation, no less!), bringing freshness even to that most familiar of subjects: love.

Now I was hooked.

AFTER SOME research, I discovered the towering figure of French cinema, the great writer and di-