

## Critics at Work

by William H. Nolte

**Neoconservative Criticism:**  
**Norman Podhoretz, Kenneth**  
**S. Lynn and Joseph Epstein**  
by Mark Royden Winchell  
Boston: Twayne Publishers;  
175 pp., \$22.95

Just what is "neoconservative criticism"? What gives it any particular essence or distinguishes it from other brands being bartered in bookstores and newsstands throughout the Republic? The wiseacre might answer that it is the kind of criticism practiced by neoconservatives, and thus leave us where we began—that is, in the dark. Which is just about where we find ourselves after turning the final page of Professor

Winchell's sometimes amusing, if not very enlightening, study of the phenomenon (assuming there is such a thing). The three critics chosen as exemplars of neoconservative crit. may, or may not, relish the pigeonhole they have been asked to occupy, but never mind: they are treated tenderly, at times almost lovingly, and hence will not think of calling their lawyers. If none of the trio has the heft and beam of a great critic or editor, all have raised considerable dust in the literary arena, and they have made some imprint on the *National Letters*.

But there is still that neoconservative tag that bothers me, as it apparently bothers Winchell, who tries—not very successfully—to pin it down in his first chapter, and then waves at it again in the final two or three pages of the book. Early on we are informed that neocon-

servative intellectuals "are recent converts to laissez-faire economics and have been cultural traditionalists from the cradle," and that their conversion to the (political) right is attributable to the ideological "struggle between pro-Communist and anti-Communist intellectuals during the middle decades of this century." Which may help our understanding a little but surely not much. At least we are spared hearing about the political pilgrimage of the anti-anticommunists. But we do hear something of how neoconservatives (who, in some way, resemble current liberals) differ from paleoconservatives—mainly regarding how those two subspecies view the Founding Fathers of our "liberal democratic traditions." In fact, one critic, called upon for aid in the "defining" process, suggests that neoconservatives might better be la-

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beled paleoliberals. Incidentally, if no one seems to know quite what to make of "liberal" when used as an adjective, everyone seems pleased with the "democratic" label—despite the fact that "democracy" has little if any concrete meaning these days, having become almost pure abstraction; even more abstract than the word "freedom," which at least retains a residue of concrete meaning.

Of far more interest, to me anyhow, are the following chapters on the three critics and their pronouncements pro and con—especially con. Indeed, they are all more than a little touchy and quick to take offense, and they all enjoy nothing more than the controversy that allows them to vent their spleen. The most common enemy for Norman Podhoretz, who has been editor of *Commentary* since 1960, has been Marxism in general and American leftists in particular. Winchell also touches on various disputes Podhoretz has had with such writers as Hannah Arendt, Norman Mailer, and Gore Vidal. He chastised Arendt for being too harsh on the Jews and too soft on the Nazis in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; he felt betrayed by Mailer, a good friend, who wrote an unfavorable review of *Making It*, which ironically was inspired, Winchell says, by Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself*; and he accused Vidal of being anti-Semitic for having attacked him (Podhoretz) and other Jewish supporters of Israel. Not having read Vidal's article I cannot comment on its content or its alleged anti-Semitism, but the following curious statement leaves no doubt of Winchell's position: "What [Podhoretz] discovered was that left-wing tolerance of anti-Semitism has grown so widespread that very few prominent liberals bothered to criticize Vidal, even when Podhoretz urged them to do so." I say curious since I can see no reason for writers of any persuasion to do Podhoretz's bidding unless they have their own reasons for doing so. One surely doesn't have to be a racist in order to find fault with Israel. The reader deserves a better briefing in this matter than the little that Winchell provides.

If Podhoretz's animadversions are mainly political, those of Kenneth Lynn and Joseph Epstein are more strictly literary in nature. What binds

the three together, as I say, is their rancor. They are forever riding forth to do battle against their erring fellow critics, correcting the misinterpretations (and misreadings), as they see them, of their peers—and thereby performing one of the critic's noblest functions. Critical disputes, it seems to me, are always salubrious. Moreover, the best criticism will invariably be judicious—that is, judgmental. And judgments, in turn, beget disagreements, which are not only beneficial to our understanding but are entertaining to the reader or observer. And since criticism is an art rather than a science, the critic must entertain in order to capture and hold an audience. Lynn, for example, satisfies all those criteria in his *The Air-Line to Seattle*, a collection of essays on literary and historical writing in America that is almost entirely negative in its assessments. That is, negative in its assessment of this or that historian's or critic's assessment of Hemingway, or Thomas Jefferson, or Walt Whitman, or whomever. (Incidentally, most of the articles in *Air-Line* first appeared in Podhoretz's *Commentary* and in the *American Scholar*, which is edited by Epstein.) Lynn will probably be best remembered for his exhaustive study of Hemingway's life and work, published in 1987, which, despite its psychoanalytical approach (only a humorless Freudian could swallow it whole without choking and begging mercy), both debunks the myths that have grown up around the man and corrects various interpretations of the work that have gone unchallenged.

In the chapters devoted to Epstein, Winchell concentrates almost as much on the personality of his subject as on his *oeuvre*; this is understandable, since Epstein is much more confessional, so to speak, than his two fellow critics. He is also more the stylist, as evidenced by the essays he writes under the pseudonym Aristides for each issue of the *American Scholar*. Winchell is at his best in examining that style. In paying tribute, however, he sometimes descends to the merely feckless—as here, for example: "But Epstein is never more appealing than when he is waxing nostalgic or introspective. For those who share his dislikes, it is comforting to know that the smirking polemicist is also an honest-to-God hu-

man being. For those who want to go on hating him, that revelation is probably as disconcerting as being charmed by your ex-wife's current husband."

But all in all, this little book is amusing enough. Any reader interested in the current literary scene will enjoy the gossip, if nothing else.

*William H. Nolte is an emeritus professor of English at the University of South Carolina.*

## Fiddling Around by J.O. Tate

**Mischa Elman and the Romantic Style**

by Allan Kozinn

New York: Harwood Academic Publishers; 405 pp., \$42.00

**From Russia to the West: The Musical Memoirs and Reminiscences of Nathan Milstein**

by Nathan Milstein and

Solomon Volkov

Translated from the Russian by

Antonina W. Bouis

New York: Henry Holt and Company; 282 pp., \$24.95

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All of the enchantment of the violin and its repertory, the provenance of Russia and specifically of Odessa, the pedagogy of Leopold Auer (who also taught Jascha Heifetz, Efrem Zimbalist, and Toscha Seidel), and decades of international celebrity—that's a lot in common. But these books, one about Mischa Elman and one by Nathan Milstein, are in no way a matched set. They don't even belong on the same shelf.

Allan Kozinn's study of Elman gives his subject the benefit of research, knowledge, and perspective. Mischa Elman (1891-1967) was a child prodigy who emerged from a humble background to achieve towering success in only a few years. By 1904, he had made a successful Berlin debut. In the next year, he caused a sensation in London and was asked to play for the kings of England and Spain. At the age of 17, Mischa Elman was already "the king of violinists"—but not for long.

He was soon to be the victim of a