

April 1, 1990 (Vol. 5, no. 15)

Dear Colleague:

The art historian and publisher, Gary Schwartz, has been resisting the de-attribution of "The Polish Rider," which up to now is considered one of Rembrandt's great masterpieces. Yet so powerful are the forces of critical denigration that Schwartz found himself wavering. He notes that for him too, "features of the painting which were always considered marks of its greatness as long as it was Rembrandt--a certain vagueness, a poetic suggestiveness, an ambiguity of meaning--turn into signs of inferior artistry when they are attributed to Drost."

I feel deeply saddened by reading the above. What boneless wonders we all are, really, even the scholars among us. All the more, therefore, I admire the old-fashioned, curmudgeonly critics who, like children, seem utterly proof against the fickle winds of fashion. They disdain offering adverse criticism as a waste of time, or as something you do because you, as a college tutor, are paid to do so. Instead, again perhaps like children, they devote their scholarly labors to songs of praise for authors they love and whom they regard as unjustly neglected. If such a critic is armed with massive learning and unforced eloquence, he or she can be very effective, shift the warm front as it were, and turn the winds around. Thus C. S. Lewis almost single-handedly restored the reputation of Edmund Spenser and John Milton. Of course, the critic can go too far. Consider The Allegory of Love (1936), Lewis's first major work of scholarship. In it he praises Thomas Usk and Lydgate, writers who are not as interesting as Lewis makes them sound. Lewis's biographer, A. N. Wilson writes:

The treasures are real enough. But who would guess, for example, having read some of the Lydgate he quotes--

And as I strode myself alloone upon the Nuwe Yeare night,
I prayed unto the frosty moone, with her pale light

--what a dull time we should have if we tried to read our way through The Fall of Princes?

Alexis de Tocqueville saw in democracy all sorts of virtue, but also the twin evils of envy and resentment. We cannot afford to praise, for that would be to admit excellence in another. We do not praise, and yet because no one can actually live without some kind of hero, we blindly adore whoever is limelited by the purveyors of fashion.

Best wishes,

