

21 May 2008

Clive James
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Dear Clive James,

I'm writing in response to your *Cultural Amnesia*. I should certainly be doing something else – my own work – and maybe you would rather be too, but here goes, as briefly as possible. My starting-point is that I really enjoyed your book and learned a lot, so *thank you*. But that doesn't tell you much new, whereas the following, in no particular order, might.

One regrettable omission is E.P. Thompson, the great English historian and campaigner. I recommend you take a look at his polemic against Althusserian Marxism and theoretical dogmatism in general: *The Poverty of Theory* (1978). It is a masterpiece of its kind and devastated the reputation of this form of Continental communism in the UK (thereby splitting the intellectual left for some years to come).

Your discussion of jazz is very good – but no Thelonious Monk, the epitome of civilized musical genius? Nor Sonny Rollins, whose music is such a glorious celebration of life? (Perhaps best in his work with Cleman Hawkins.) And there is a lot of beautiful contemporary trio and quartet 'chamber jazz' – European as well as American – that also escapes your justified strictures on the dead-end into which Parker, Coltrane et al. led us. (Bill Evans is perhaps the best single exemplar here, but he has several worthy living heirs.)

But in any case, jazz does not exhaust modern popular music, and to even pretend to address the latter without placing Bob Dylan centre-stage is exactly like omitting Picasso from an account of painting or Joyce from one of writing. Specifically, Dylan revolutionized popular music in 1965-67, when he made music that is still superlative ("Visions of Johanna", "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry", "Mr Tambourine Man"...). Pity him, though: he was in the grip of a genius that dropped him in 1968, and it took until 1997 to approach the same heights... You might also pause to consider why, although his music was never commercially-driven or even all that successful, he has received an Academy Award, a Grammy, *and* a Pulitzer Prize.

Another omission, although not grievous, is Roberto Calasso, who would have fitted well in your Italian intellectual pantheon. I assume you already know enough about him to see what I mean. (*The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* is a masterpiece.)

Hubert Butler – a very fine essayist and aphorist! (Including his essay on “The Children of Drancy”.) E.g.:

- “No gain is permanent, and permanence is not a gain either.”
- “When an incendiary sets a match to respectability, it smoulders malodorously; but piety, like patriotism, goes off like a rocket.”
- “It is as neighbours, full of ineradicable prejudices, that we must learn to love each other, and not as fortuitously ‘separated brethren’.”

Molnár on the fabulist: cf. Mary McCarthy on Lillian Hellman: “Every word she writes is a lie, including ‘and’ and ‘the’.”

If this letter impels you to *do* only one thing, let it be to see the three “Heimat” films by Edgar Reitz. (One and three are the best, which is to say that two is only very good.) Proust was Reitz’s literary mentor, and he has done the master proud.

A couple of quotations à propos one of your principal themes:

- Orwell, on his youth: “I knew I had a facility with words and a power of facing unpleasant facts.”
- Max Weber (another of my heroes): “Age is not decisive; what is decisive is the trained relentlessness in viewing the realities of life, and the ability to face such realities and to measure up to them inwardly.” (1919)

P. 42: Machiavelli’s “invitation to despotism” was a disingenuous ploy to get his old job back; when it failed, he wrote what he really thought in *Discourses on Livy*, which was essentially a paean to republican citizenship and (ironically, given his reputation) distinctly idealistic. Isaiah Berlin’s essay on M. is still excellent; and as Berlin points out, Machiavelli’s agonistic value-pluralism is behind a great deal of modern political pluralism (a Good Thing).

P. 44: “No ideology can tolerate a full historical consciousness. Only realism can...” I’m sorry, but I can’t let you get away with that. To quote the (misunderestimated, shall we say) American literary critic Kenneth Burke, “Where there’s meaning, there’s persuasion” – i.e., rhetoric; and where there’s rhetoric, there’s ideology. However “realism” starts out, by the time it gets shared (promulgated, discussed, etc.) it too is ideological. Not *only* ideological, of course. But if there is – as I assert – an ideological dimension to *every* public discourse, then it is no use backing one which purportedly isn’t. What needs to be done is to ask, Is this a constructive/compassionate ideology or a destructive/pathological one? And so on. By its fruits shall ye know it, to coin a phrase.

This is the intelligent ‘postmodernism’ (basically, updated Nietzschean scepticism) which you unfortunately – and, I suspect, with very little acquaintance – throw out with the bathwater of vulgar relativism. (It would be absurd to bracket Derrida or Lyotard with Sartre, although Foucault perhaps less so.) And with respect, your uncritical support for “realism” is what makes your book, in the delicate words of Terence Kilmartin whom you quote concerning Raymond Aron (late in life), “A little bit right-wing”.

P. 359: Naomi Klein is Canadian. (As I am, or was.)

Perhaps Dylan's absence is part of a generational phenomenon. I was born in 1951 and I feel keenly the absence in your book of the 1960s (i.e., 1965-74 or so) that I knew. Not the political 60s (I discovered politics later) but the spiritual explosion, the drugs, the music! Without denying its excesses, casualties and unforeseen undesirable consequences – principally hedonistic individualism, which then became easy prey for corporate capital and its political backers – it is also true that the 60s included a tremendous idealism and optimism which had some very positive consequences still with us: much of anti-racism and feminism, and virtually the entire environmental movement – which, I suspect, will define the 21st century as much as purely human issues, so to speak, did the 20th. Already, as the world starts to burn or drown and capital tries to sell us the 'solutions' – not to mention the wave of mass extinctions now underway, entirely human-caused – who else is resisting this suicidal as well as homicidal rush? Yet to judge by your book, most if not all of this has passed you by...

That leads me to the most delicate point of all. But as you say somewhere, the sore point is often the real point. You know well Benjamin's assertion that "There is no document of civilization which is not also a document of barbarism." Not the least important word there is "also"; neither point cancels out the other (which is what makes it an enduring statement). Your book addresses both, except in one striking respect: you seem to be unaware of, or perhaps in denial about, the barbarity of imperialism. It is as if the entire so-called New World – North, South and Central America, Australia, and New Zealand – before its so-called "discovery" (that extraordinarily insulting term, still used) is an enormous cultural and political *terra nullius*. This, I have to say, seems a rather gross instance of cultural amnesia. May I recommend, as a starting-point, Ronald Wright's *Stolen Continents* (as well as his excellent *A Short History of Progress*)? As for the Aborigines, being Australian you will no doubt have a better idea than me of what to read. The point is that the barbarism of Europeans outside Europe has been as blood-soaked as it was inside, yet every bit as integral to its culture. So that too deserves to be remembered.

Let me repeat: I enjoyed your book enormously and learned a great deal. Thanks again. And I don't ask for engagement with its content but I would appreciate knowing you received this.

Yours sincerely,

Patrick Curry

P.S. An afterthought: Jean Amery, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (Granta Books, 1999).