

ARTS & LETTERS

Critics and Ethics

"Why Ethical Criticism Fell on Hard Times" by Wayne C. Booth, in *Ethics* (Jan. 1988), Univ. of Chicago Press, P.O. Box 37005, Chicago, Ill. 60637.

A popular notion among academics is that it is not possible to determine the true worth of anything. In literary criticism, this dogma leads to the contention that *any* statement—e.g., "Dickens and Dostoyevsky were great writers"—is simply an expression of personal preference.

"Nowadays almost no one believes in the possibility of objective or 'correct' literary judgments," Oxford's John Carey wrote recently.

Booth, a professor of English at the University of Chicago, says the chief argument that skeptics use to attack any absolute literary verdict is this: Judgments change over time. A teen-ager may be enthralled by Alexandre Dumas's *Count of Monte Cristo*; an adult re-reading the novel may find it tedious. One reader may have "wept buckets" over *Love Story*; another may have been bored. Writers such as George Steiner believe that the best way to judge the value of a work is to tally all opinions about it and decide which one has the most votes. "Consensus over the ages is statistical," Steiner asserts.

But not all opinions, Booth replies, are equal. The critic who has seen *King Lear* performed 10 times and knows the history of tragedies will be more likely to produce a measured judgment than the critic who has read the play once.

Moreover, the modernist insistence that ethical principles cannot be used to judge art results in artistic creations (e.g., abstract paintings) with no moral, emotional, or spiritual content. It is "no accident" that many American novelists abandoned traditional forms just as literary critics jettisoned (as irrelevant) time-honored ethical standards.

Ethics should not be discarded, Booth says. Unlike most contemporary talk, debate about the moral yardsticks used in measuring literature leads to useful "ultimate questions" about the nature and purpose of life. Deciding that doctors should treat bleeding patients does not depend on determining life's meaning. However, analyzing the behavior of Shakespeare's protagonists cannot be done "in isolation" from discussions of what life should be or how characters should be portrayed.

Victorian Follies

"The Victorians, the Historians, and the Idea of Modernism" by James A. Schmiechen, in *The American Historical Review* (Apr. 1988), 400 A St. S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003.

Most contemporary scholars have dismissed Victorian buildings as eclectic "fruit salad," whose frilly revivals of past architectural styles are out of place in the 20th century.

Schmiechen, a Central Michigan University historian, disagrees with modernist critiques. Far from being frivolous escapist, Victorian architects were the sober-minded re-designers of aging industrial centers.

By the 1830s, British cities were filled with ugly buildings based on "cash-box" utilitarianism. Social critics, most notably novelist Charles