

FOOD FOR THOUGHT 4:

NEGATIVE BOOK REVIEWS VS. *BAD* BOOK REVIEWS: WALTER KIRN ON CYNTHIA OZICK IN *THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*, JULY 2, 2006.

ONE

Over the past thirty years, I've written, I suppose (not counting long essay-reviews), somewhere near a dozen newspaper-length reviews and somewhere in the neighborhood of four hundred shorter ones, "short" in this case meaning about 350 words. Or so.

I wrote the short ones over a two-decade span, all for the same outlet—a publication that made an effort to provide brief but solid and honest reviews of every significant trade book, both fiction and non-fiction, published annually in the country. Over the decades, the magazine's coverage varied—self-help and cookbooks were once included, then later weren't, for example, and poetry was, then wasn't (and then again was and then wasn't). Mass market paperbacks were never included, though original trade paperbacks *were*.

It all amounted to approximately four thousand reviews a year, which means, over twenty years, a total of about 80,000.

I mention all this for a reason: over those two decades of four-thousand-review-years, I learned more, not just about reviewing, but about *writing* than I could ever have imagined myself not having already known.

I was very close to the magazine's editor (and still am, even though she's no longer at that post), and countless times, especially in the earlier years, she would ask me to take a look at one or another review before she got down to the nuts and bolts hard work of editing it into something copy-ready. The reason she asked my advice all those times was that she herself had sensed *something* awry with the piece, and what she wanted to know was whether I would, or wouldn't, also sense *something* awry with it.

And she was always right. Once she'd seen it, I saw it. Sometimes the pieces could be fixed editorially, with or without consulting the review's writer, and other times the thing had to be sent back for a complete rewrite. *Sometimes*, if the piece was radically unsound and deadlines pressed hard, books got dropped, never to be reviewed in *this* magazine—and very possibly not in any other.

It was a serious business, this business of being honest and sound about books, and this editor, accordingly, approached it with unremitting seriousness and with an almost super-human indefatigability. Clearly, the reviews *had* to be short, for reasons

both of cost and space, since the aim was to review as close to *everything* as possible, which naturally meant the good, the medium, *and* the bad, the aim being, further, to be equally honest and sound in treating every single book in all three ranks. Such demands differ radically in review outlets like, say, *The New York Times Book Review*, where only a near-infinitesimal fraction of any year's new books get attention in print. An argument even *could* probably be made that there might never be reason for the *Times* to give space to negative reviews, since the publication has no obligation to review bad books.

In my case, though, or in my editor's case, there very *much* was such an obligation, and so, to do it all, the reviews had to be short. In the hands of a master editor who was also a master teacher and a master cultivator of excellent reviewers, that short form excelled, gave out real energy along with its judgment and information, very, very often—I still think this—outshining, outclassing, and out-zapping the great majority of the lazily talky, mid-length reviews of the sort—in the *Times*, say—most readers see most often.

And now to close in on point of this essay. Those writing for this editor often said they were “the sonneteers of book reviewing,” and I think they were right. There had to be completeness within a very small space. There had to be integrity of movement from first line to last, with no line failing to carry the central burden and, at the same time, no line failing to *advance* the simultaneous description and judgment that was being made. Above all, there could be nothing *unsound*, nothing *unsupported* (implicitly or explicitly), nothing not *honest*, all of this within the rigorous physical and rhetorical constraints of real brevity.

What I became practiced in, working with this editor, was how to *hear*, how to *sense*, how to *know* the difference between a perfectly good *negative* review (try reviewing four thousand books without being negative) and a *bad* review, whether negative, positive, or in between.

What's a *bad* review? Well, a bad review is one that's *not* honest and sound in the approach it makes to a book, or that's *not* honest and sound in its description and judgment of that book.

It's that kind of review, a *bad* one, that Walter Kirn wrote of Cynthia Ozick's *The Din in the Head: Essays* in the *Sunday Times* of July 2, 2006.

TWO

Anyone who wants to can read the entire review by clicking [<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/02/books/review/02kirn.html?ex=1154491200&en=7c898f4a8997bc21&ei=5070>] here, though I'll aim to quote from it generously enough both to be fair to it and to provide a sense of its flavor. And it's that—the flavor, *tone*—that can't be escaped even in Kirn's very opening words:

Though few thinkers still bother to attack it, let alone go on proclaiming its death, the novel remains exceedingly well defended, commanding larger, more ferocious armies than such a modest institution requires. Indeed, protecting novels from all threats, real and imagined, seems at times to constitute a more vigorous cultural enterprise than the actual writing of the things.

Everywhere in this paragraph are hints of trickery (and thus bad reviewing) rather than candor and openness (and therefore good even if negative reviewing). What we get here is an assiduously maintained tone of condescension, superiority, and superciliousness. This is the tone of a speaker *not* making it clear that he feels responsible for doing a certain job well (namely, reviewing this book that *he's* read and that *we* haven't), *not* for describing for us something that *he's* seen and we haven't—but instead making it clear that he considers himself superior to the entire matter and that that's the first thing that should be made clear.

The diction, subtly but surely, reveals this tone throughout, from the choice of the snootily dismissive “bother” rather than “undertake” or “try” or “set out to,” on to the intentionally overblown and thus faintly sarcastic phrases “proclaiming its death” and “larger, more ferocious armies,” on to the truly egregious and outright distasteful—in the sheer breadth of its sophomoric, nose-in-the air pooh-poohing of something in actuality far more vast and significant than *this* writer will allow—the phrase, that is, referring to the genre of the novel, “such a modest institution.” Then, to end this condemnation—by diminution of the subject and by claiming superiority to it—Kirn has the prideful, mean-spirited, know-nothing gall to speak of “the actual writing of the things.”

Anyone who has studied, experienced, or come to know even a fair chunk of the tradition of the novel, say, from *Quixote* to Faulkner (or Ozick or, I shudder to add, Kirn) knows perfectly well that the words opening this review can't be taken except as those of a poseur, shallow thinker, or ignoramus, or perhaps at the very least of a person so self-involved and mean-spirited as not to be able to put aside his cocktail-party airs even for one, single, introductory moment.

Writing of this kind, especially as an opener, shows that we're in the hands not of a reviewer but of a judgmentalist, not of an expert but a show-off. And the chances of our getting from this person a good review—however negative? Those chances, one suspects, are very slim. As I myself found out, in fact they're zero.



I know they're zero for this reason: the review set off so many alarm bells of falseness that it sent me straight to the book itself, which I ordered, received, and have now finished reading. And I'm able to announce that it's not even the same book that Kirn “reviewed.”

Where to start? Well, perhaps on a note that's to some degree personal. As the author of a recently published, highly critical and deeply pessimistic book about American culture, I'd be dishonest if I didn't admit that Kirn's review brings me the joy and, simultaneously, the groaning sorrow of coming upon yet another piece of

evidence—of evidence that I was *right*. Or that I *am* right. That the *book* is right. Kirn, in short, provides an absolutely perfect example of an intellectual type that I write about at length in *A Nation Gone Blind: America in an Age of Simplification and Deceit*; and it's this type: the intellectual who *believes* himself or herself still to *be* an independently thinking intellectual and an effectual intellectual judge of matters salient or germane—but who in cold fact is *not* an independent thinking intellectual but, instead, another crippled and half-seeing adult child of the Age of Simplification. Kirn purports to be an intellectual, but in point of actuality he is himself one of the simplifieds.

Everything he looks at in the review, he looks at wrongly by merit of looking at it *partially*. And, while he looks at it *partially*, he comports himself with the superiority and extremely unpleasant self-assuredness of one who *assumes* and *believes* himself to be seeing all such things, without any doubt whatsoever, in their fullness.

These qualities of the simplified intellectual, the same as with the New Professors as I analyze them in *A Nation Gone Blind*, make of Kirn the proud declarer of half truths that he takes as whole ones, and they make of him also, again as with the New Professors, an intellectual who is thin, testy, self-infatuated, and, probably most important of all, *incapable of genuine seriousness*.

Kirn's supercilious tone, and his inability to get rid of it or find another tone, reveals the presence of these thinned-out traits in the writer who *believes* firmly that he's seeing whole (though readers of Ozick's book will find *her* to be the whole-seer, Kirn to be the half). His second paragraph opens with the ever-present snideness as, again, the half-seer routinely mistakes style for substance: "The form's latest self-styled guardian is Cynthia Ozick," he writes, and we ask: Why on earth the deprecating "self-styled"? The answer is that there's *no* reason, as Kirn himself reveals by tossing out a hypocritical crumb or two, calling Ozick "an accomplished novelist herself and a high-ranking literary critic," thereby leaving us to ponder how it is that she's both "high-ranking" and at the same time "self-styled."

That question won't be answered, as such questions are *never* answered by simplifieds like Kirn. Instead, he'll give us more condescension, half truths posing as whole, and more loaded words. Ozick, he says,

Along with so many other traditionalists, cherishes the belief, now quixotic, that serious fiction and those who dream it up are still controversial enough to be embattled and "in danger of obsolescence."

Only Kirn and god know what he may mean by "serious fiction" or "dream it up," but we don't need god or anyone else to know that "cherishes" is a snide, condescending, and loaded word, or to know (as *I* know, having read the book) that Kirn is setting out to make Ozick sound like an obsessive, not a thinker, and an obsessive about something ridiculously *minor*—that is, in the Olympian view of the simplified.

It gets worse, if only by staying the same. After tossing out another handful of hypocritical sops by naming some of the illustrious magazines Ozick has published these essays in, he writes that she

Sounds the latest of a million warnings about the oft postponed catastrophe that only novelists still fear, despite their perennial attempts to make the public dread it, too.

And so Kirn, we realize, is never going to review this book and has no intention of doing so; instead, he is merely going to trivialize its subject (as *he* sees it), relentlessly mock its author, and, as for himself, walk offstage to the applause of his like-minded and equally simplified friends, himself scot-free from any harm, injury, or challenge for the very good reason that he has committed himself to nothing whatsoever, however much he may think and believe, being a simplified and a child of the Age of Simplification, that he has stood up and spoken out for great and deep volumes of meaning.

In one moment of accuracy, he does quote Ozick:

But if the novel were to wither—if, say, it metamorphosed altogether into a species of journalism or movies, as many popular novels already have—then the last trustworthy vessel of the inner life (aside from our heads) would crumble away.

As the author of “The Death of Literary Thinking in America: How It Happened and What It Means” (the middle chapter of *A Nation Gone Blind*), I can hardly deny that Ozick strikes in my own heart, unlike Kirn’s, an enormously sympathetic chord. I, in fact, see the situation as being far worse than Ozick does, as, too, I see far more than merely the “popular” novels having withered already into something considerably worse, even, than “journalism or movies.” But that’s not the issue here. The issue isn’t whether I happen to agree or disagree with Ozick’s view. The issue isn’t even whether *Kirn* agrees or disagrees with it. The issue is that he shows not only no will but *no capacity even to take the question seriously*. If only in this single trait, held to with a blind absoluteness, he proves himself a child of simplification.

The subject (the one, that is, of greatest concern to *him*; anyone who reads the book will find that it’s broader and more wide-ranging in subjects than Kirn remotely hints) is now out in the open, and Kirn follows its introduction by doing two things. First, he denigrates it through more insouciance; and, second, he misrepresents its actual role in Ozick’s book.

The insouciance:

If novelists were all to go on strike someday, the world might finally understand that it can’t live without them, as they [the novelists] insist, but since they can’t seem to bear to drop their pens, society must rely on fuzzier evidence for the alleged necessity of their services.

And, in his next sentence, the misrepresentation:

In essay after essay, Ozick seeks to provide this evidence by praising her favorite fiction writers in ways that bring out both their virtues as individuals and their glories as a class.

Helen Keller as a “favorite fiction writer”? The poet Sylvia Plath? The poet Delmore Schwartz? The question, “What is a Jewish book?”? The essay on Trilling that’s predominantly about how he *wasn’t* a fiction writer? The essay on Gershom Scholem, scholar, founder of Hebrew University? Robert Alter and his translation into English of the Pentateuch? Obviously—*obviously*—Kirn either failed to read Ozick’s book or he chose deliberately not to acknowledge the actual nature of its breadth, range, and often remarkable scholarship.

Either way, to lie by omission or to lie by commission, is deplorable and repugnant, and the result of doing so is deplorable and repugnant. Kirn’s review, in short, is deplorable and repugnant. It’s also inexcusable, shameful, base, and unprofessional. Whether its presence in the pages of *The New York Times Book Review* says more about Kirn or about the *Times*, I don’t know. I do know that anyone who wants to know more about such dismal matters as these might do well to read *A Nation Gone Blind: America in an Age of Simplification and Deceit*.



On the basis of this review, the only thing in the universe I’m able to imagine myself sharing with Walter Kirn is a powerful dislike for John Updike. I indeed dislike that writer strongly, while, as it happens, Cynthia Ozick is filled with high admiration for him and sees his work as both towering and as deeply American. Maybe she’s right, though my own tastes and judgment lead me toward different conclusions. As, apparently, do Kirn’s. But this—this distaste for a single writer in a single chapter out of the twenty that make up the book—*this* is no reason to justify or allow the hi-jacking of an entire review and the narrowing of it down into a form of extended character assassination, first, and then diverting it into a wild-eyed rave about a subject that isn’t even a part of the book’s own immediate subject at all, that subject being “the canon,” and the rave being Kirn’s maniac and ad hominem attack on Ozick because he *thinks* she *must* be a defender of the “canon,” a high-brow la-dee-dah who even, god forbid, uses “long words.”

Ah, the penury and malice of it, the narrowness posing as elevated pride and righteous demeanor, the sheer *simplification* of a mind such as Kirn’s, at least as it’s exemplified here.

He can’t stand Ozick, Updike, or real intellectuals, and, by god, he’s going to let all three of them have it.

He sets his primary victim up by quoting a line that does indeed express Ozick’s towering estimation of Updike, a line that, for those who dislike Updike, may easily seem over-wrought:

John Updike: the name is graven. It stands, by now, alongside Cather, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, those older masters who lay claim to territory previously untrafficked, and who make of it common American ground.

Kirn reveals his hatred of anything the least bit elevated by next pronouncing that “The opening sentences of the book’s fourth piece [this one, this sentence] are typical of Ozick’s high-church manner, which sometimes seeks to persuade through extra syllables and weighty antiquarianism as much as though conventional argument.” That Kirn’s pronouncement isn’t true—the only truth revealed here is that he hates any kind of style the least bit formal or unsimplified—doesn’t much matter in a piece where the true and the false are already so inextricably mixed. What matters is that Kirn, in the power of his will that everything be flip, simple, and supercilious, is himself unable to see the distinctions between what *is* false and what *is* true, and *certainly* not between what *is* serious and what *isn’t*.

Her point about Updike, once she gets around to making it and empties herself of incantations (“His effects are of sheen and shadow, color and form, spine and splay, hair and haunch”), is that he knows how to ground his large abstractions in small particulars.

This is typical of Kirn in its snideness, even though it’s not my own favorite Ozick sentence either. This is partly because I find it impossible to imagine esteeming Updike—though even the amount I *have* read of his fiction gives me an understanding of how perfectly chosen her noun, “haunch,” in fact really is. I may not like Updike, but “hair and haunch” is about as accurate a pairing in evoking the Updikean mode and mood as I can imagine. Kirn, though, goes simply swirly-eyed with hating it, as we’ll see in a moment. More important, though, first, is his condescending castigation and scorn of Ozick for being able to say, in her praise of Updike, merely that “he knows how to ground his large abstractions in small particulars.”

If Kirn were to read *A Nation Gone Blind*, he might discover how enormous—and how all but lost—a quality in writing it is he’s excoriating here as trivial.

But the true depravities of his sustained ad hominem attack on Ozick and her presumed ilk, whom he despises equally, only now reach their full extent, as Kirn departs altogether from the last vestiges of his duties and responsibilities as a reviewer—to talk, that is, about the book—and diverges willfully onto a siding where he can snidely chop and cut away at something he hates even more than he hates the mere Ms. Ozick. So here we go:

A writer who opts for the feathered word “haunch” over its flightless synonyms, such as “thigh,” who calls the speechlike prose of Philip Roth “a dazzling demotic voice,” and who knows as though by instinct, that the proper term for something Saul Bellow-ish is “Bellovian” can be counted on to defend the Western canon—and to celebrate the idea of canons in general. For a civilization to be civilized it must have bars, Ozick asserts. Those bars must be placed high, and the rare minds who manage to vault over them must be regaled with anthems and medallions. In the nightmare of blurred distinctions, all will be lost Ozick, hints, and she means all—even our very lives, perhaps.

This is scandalous stuff. I, too, dislike Roth, but take out the “dazzling” and the rest, the “demotic” part, is true enough. That aside, I only wish Kirn would have *one* serious thought, give *one* thing serious intellectual attention, do *one* thing honestly, and for even

one nano-second give up his prissy little “how dumb I am and therefore how cool I am” entering-level sophomore song and dance.

For one thing, Ozick isn’t a canon-defender, but she *is* an intellectual-defender. Kirn seemingly wants *The Dunciad* to come true, the low to be the high, the dumb to be the smart. His little snit-words are unbearable and a bore, as in “the *rare* minds” and “*vault* over them” and “regaled with anthems and medallions.” There are many words for this kind of writing, but one of them—or two—are craven bullshit.

What Ozick is *really* doing (though you’d never know it from Kirn’s feeble babblings) is simply talking about intellectual seriousness—and she’s doing it, in this chapter, with the Jonathan Franzen/Oprah Winfrey fracas as a take-off point, when Franzen famously and self-damagingly remarked that “I feel. . . like I’m solidly in the high-art literary tradition.” In the ensuing discussion, Kirn cites (or snipes at) what he wants to cite and leaves out the rest. “Distinction-making, even distinction-discerning, is largely in decline,” writes Ozick, unaware that she’s touching the deepest nerve in Kirn’s black and decayed “hey-this-dumbed-down-intellectual-world-is-great” tooth. He goes positively mad with rage:

The canon [though in fact this subject has never been mentioned by Ozick] as cannon, holding off the savages. Like the rampant jihadists who frighten her [another creation of Kirn’s active imagination], she esteems the written word so highly [as Kirn, obviously, doesn’t] that she equates its corruption with damnation. She’s a bohemian fundamentalist, convinced that if literature should lose its special status as the final arbiter of humanness, the deity will unleash another Great Flood.

How about something that Ozick really does say? For example: “These observations [about general diminishment in literary interest] are hardly new, but familiarity does not lessen the shock and the ignominy of a pervasive indifference to serious critical writing.” *This* makes her “a bohemian fundamentalist,” similar to a “rampant jihadist”? Something else she says—and she *really does say it*, though you’ll find it nowhere in Kirn—is that “Distinction-making, even distinction-discerning, is largely in decline.” Ah *ha!* Now we *know* she’s unleashed, a madwoman, a rabid antiquarian who wants to return to the calm certainties of, say, 1874. No, Kirn aside, there’s nothing reactionary here, nothing radical, nothing blinded by class superiority or love of those “rare minds” Kirn himself, in fact, seems to be so jealous of or intimidated by that all he can do is mock them, never identify or define them. No, Ozick is the one looking calmly at literary and social America today, not Kirn. Ozick is the one pointing to those losses that are indeed important losses—like distinction-making, a loss that, yes, just might let America be made a police state the day after tomorrow, if it hasn’t already been done.

Leave it to Kirn to leave out what Ozick writes in demonstration of her measured way of thinking, her practice of qualifying thoughts in exactly the ways Kirn loudly declares she fails to do. “Writers,” she says, “shouldn’t be mistaken for priests, it goes without saying.” Or these are her words, that is, unless Kirn has gotten into the printer’s plates and scrubbed them out of every copy of the book except mine. But now there’s real trouble ahead—because Ozick is going to do that very thing so despised by Kirn: that is,

she's going to make distinctions. And what that means, in turn, is this: *she's going to think*. Here's the whole paragraph:

Writers shouldn't be mistaken for priests, it goes without saying; but neither should movie-script manufacturers be mistaken for writers. Readers are not the same as audiences, and the structure of a novel is not the same as the structure of a lingerie advertisement. Hierarchy, to be sure, is an off-putting notion, invoking high and low; and high smacks of snobbery and antiegalitarianism. But hierarchy also points to the recognition of distinctions, and—incontrovertibly—the life of intellect is perforce hierarchical: it insists that one thing is not the same as another thing. A novel concerned with English country-house romances is not the same as a tract on slavery in Antigua. A department of English is not the same as a Marxist tutorial. A rap CD is not the same as academic scholarship. A suicide bomber who blows up a pizzeria crowded with baby carriages is not the same as a nation-builder.

Is it the mention of the baby carriages that gives Kirn license to make the allegation—or utter the deception—that “rampant jihadists . . . frighten” Ozick? And what exactly *is* it in Ozick's list of things that aren't the same as other things that enrages him to say that her “Ciceronian crescendo,” as he calls it, “. . . rhetorically builds from a statement about aesthetics to an alarmist political manifesto”?

And if it *is* “a political manifesto” (it's not), what makes it “alarmist”? Kirn won't say, but instead he'll just toss a few more banana peels of innuendo and slur out onto the dance floor. He knows, I assume—unless, a most considerable likelihood, he hasn't yet read *A Nation Gone Blind*—that the very *absence* of distinction-making, hence the very *absence* of an intelligent *political* thinking that's capable of existing meaningfully with or alongside an intelligent *aesthetic* thinking—he must be aware, must he not, that this dumbed down situation, implied and deplored by Ozick throughout, is one of the most powerful reasons for any thinking person to doubt strenuously “that America will ever again produce a literature beyond the sort it does now: a depleted, imitative, unimpassioned, unoriginal, essentially *unthinking* literature”?

All right, so now I've quoted from the first page of my own book, but I'd surely rather quote from that than quote from Kirn. Only to the lazy or the philistine can it be mounted as a criticism that literary or aesthetic battles may be fought “with long words,” and only the faithless to fact can either state or imply that Ozick's book is *about* so specific a subject as the “death of the novel,” though this far broader book does indeed touch on it. Only the philistine, or the ignorant, or the affected, or the snob can allude to the massive and largely ruinous cultural changes of the past sixty years as “big issues that now feel small” and hope to get away without incurring if nothing else at least the white-hot wrath of guys like me, who feel pretty powerfully that if someone is going to drop a trendy little remark like that in a context more massive than he, apparently, can conceivably have even any tiniest notion of—well, honor dictates either that he apologize for it or, another thing I'm certain he's not capable of doing, explain *why* he feels so.

“Nothing gets old faster than an apocalypse that was scheduled for two days ago,” concludes the loathsome shallow Kirn, as if he knows the least thing about the apocalypse surrounding us all. Never one to end on a glib note when there's a more glib

one available, he adds that “If the novel did die a few years back, well, we survived, apparently.”

I beg to disagree. Kirn’s shallow, malignant, dishonest review of Ozick’s book—his *trashing* of it in, oh, so glib and trendy language and through such despicable misrepresentations of it, a book far from perfect but *infinitely* more fine than his assassination of it would suggest; these things, not to mention that all of them are apparently perfectly agreeable and acceptable to the editors, equally culpable, of *The New York Times*; all of this being the truth of the matter, no, I won’t agree with the likes of Kirn that we have survived, not at all, whether “apparently” or not.