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Cultural Observations for the Culturally Observant

Thursday, May 26, 2005

ITEM ONE: Today's commentary, "[A Common Culture in the Age of Blogging?](#)," takes a look at Terry Teachout's analysis of the loss of a common culture and the rise of the blogosphere. Teachout's outstanding artblog, [About Last Night](#), is worth bookmarking. Now, some of Teachout's fellow critics are bemoaning their loss of influence. In "[Critical Condition](#)," Scott Timberg of the [Los Angeles Times](#) reports that the elite critics are watching as their influence melts. "You get arts journalists together these days, and it's what they talk about: their declining influence," commented Doug McLennon, editor of [ArtsJournal.com](#). What these critics seem to miss is the obvious point that Americans decided not to listen to critics whose worldview and elitist tastes dripped with hostility toward the very values that made this culture possible. It's about far more than taste, dear critics.

ITEM TWO: From [About Last Night](#): "Blogging has become the intellectual's TV set." Don't touch that dial!

ITEM THREE: Cambridge University philosopher Simon Blackburn's new book, [Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed](#), is due to be released May 30. Blackburn is the author of several works on philosophy, most directed at a popular readership [or, whatever now passes for a popular readership when it comes to books on philosophy]. His last work considered the issue of lust [he was basically for it--[see my review](#)]. Reviewer John Banville, writing in [The Guardian](#) [London], reports that Blackburn takes on the likes of Richard Rorty and other "fuzzy" postmodernists. Here's an excerpt: "There are real standards. We must fight soggy nihilism, scepticism and cynicism. We must not believe that anything goes. We must not believe that all opinion is ideology, that reason is only power, that there is no truth to prevail. Without defences against postmodern irony and cynicism, multiculturalism and relativism, we will all go to hell in a handbasket." Blackburn is an ardent secularist, so it will be interesting to see how he establishes a claim to truth. My copy is on advance order. Stay tuned.

ITEM FOUR: Back before Election Day 2004, sociologist [Alan Wolfe](#) of [Boston College](#) was testing his thesis that America isn't really divided into two distinct worldviews—a thesis he defended in his book, [One Nation After All](#). Here's how he looked to the election and its meaning in [The Wilson Quarterly](#): "In the current age, there's no doubt that politics matter greatly to those who are deeply immersed in politics. Nor is there any doubt that Americans are faced in 2004 with choices that have demonstrably important consequences for the future of their country. What's not clear is whether ordinary Americans are caught up in the passions that motivate our political and media elites. Nor are we any closer to solving the longstanding mystery of what motivates people to go to the polls and cast their ballots. But because each new election tells us a little more about who we are, we'll have a better sense, when this year's election is over, of whether the purported cultural divisions that have dominated our society for more than two decades will continue, or even be exacerbated, or whether they'll begin to recede into insignificance, in the face of all that unites us." Well, the election is over, and the electoral map is more divided than ever—or at least since the mid-nineteenth century. Is Wolfe ready to revise his thesis? Reality is a difficult concept.

ITEM FIVE: Pulitzer-prize winning historian David McCullough's long-anticipated book on George Washington and the American revolution, [1776](#), is now at the bookstores. As expected, the book is superb, offering a respectful but critical evaluation of Washington and his strategic role in history. Against the revisionists, McCullough maintains a view of Washington's central leadership role in the revolution and in the founding of the new nation. Here is a key statement: "He was not a brilliant strategist or tactician, not a gifted orator, not an intellectual. At several crucial moments he had shown marked indecisiveness. He had made serious mistakes in judgment. But experience had been his great teacher from boyhood, and in this his greatest test, he learned steadily from experience. Above all, Washington never forgot what was at stake and he never gave up" [page 293]. A master is at work here. My full review will be forthcoming. In the meantime, read the book. For a special treat, listen to McCullough's reading of the book in audio edition. His voice and his words will make you want to take a long car trip just to complete the experience. Amazon.com has an [audio excerpt](#) available.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: "If their treason be suffered to take root, much mischief must grow from it." King George III of England, speaking of the American revolutionary leaders.

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