Arts & Humanities

Joseph Wood Krutch: a Rare Critic

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When former Columbia President Nicholas Murray Butler told the English department during the academic year 1936–37 that he would like to see a new faculty member appointed who might represent the man of letters rather than the specialist scholar then holding most appointments, Mark Van Doren '60HON, a member of the committee charged with nominating such a person, suggested Joseph Wood Krutch.

Krutch's association with Columbia started in 1915. Soon after arriving to undertake graduate studies in English, he befriended his classmate Van Doren, whose brother Carl was already a faculty member of that department. Carl Van Doren '11GSAS became Krutch's master's thesis supervisor, and Mark, upon receiving his Ph.D. in 1920, joined the faculty at about the same time that Carl added to his Columbia duties the position of literary editor of *The Nation* magazine. Carl reduced his Columbia teaching to part-time and hired Mark to work on the editorial board of *The Nation*. This Columbia family added both men's wives to the *The Nation* editorial board as well and recruited another Columbia graduate, Ludwig Lewisohn '03GSAS, as drama critic in 1919. When Lewisohn resigned in 1924, the board added Krutch to their editorial staff; one of his duties was to take Lewisohn's place as drama critic. That was in the same year that Krutch received his own Ph.D. and had his dissertation published as *Comedy and Conscience After the Restoration*.

Thus, for the next thirteen years (1924–37), Krutch had precious little connection to Columbia. He was busy establishing himself as a man of letters, and his duties at *The Nation* played no small part in that enterprise. Therefore, when the department acted on President Butler's suggestion and appointed Krutch, he diligently maintained his connection with *The Nation,* reducing his tasks to those of the weekly drama reviewer. Krutch began his Columbia duties in September 1937, and within a

few years was elevated to the Brander Matthews Chair of Dramatic Literature, a position he held until his retirement in 1952 from both Columbia and *The Nation*.

He brought to his two courses at Columbia -- English Drama from Dryden to Sheridan: 1660–1800 and Modern Drama (from Ibsen to the present, with emphasis on American drama) -- the excitement and rigors of almost daily theater going. In 1928, for example, 280 plays opened on Broadway; although that number dwindled during Krutch's years as a professor, the average number of openings annually was still about 100.

His classes were filled with entertainment, wit, and information as well as critical insights. To describe the atmosphere of seventeenth-century London under Charles II, he told us about the actress Nell Gwynn, one of the first professional actresses in the English theater and one of the king's mistresses, who, while riding in the king's carriage, was assumed by an angry mob to be one of the king's Catholic concubines. When pelted with stones, she leaned out of the carriage and cried, "Nay, nay, my good people -- I'm the Protestant whore."

He once described Eugene O'Neill to us, a playwright whom he enthusiastically admired, by saying, "He was a man of genius without talent." His sentences, his anecdotes, and his performances were not only unforgettable but arousing, with the result that his courses began to overflow with both graduate and undergraduate students. He told us about his animated conversations with O'Neill, and then reported to us that he had told O'Neill that his students considered him their favorite American playwright and Ibsen their favorite European. O'Neill responded, "Tsk, tsk, I wish it were Strindberg."

Krutch talked about these conversations and about his discomfort with the latest Broadway potboiler. But the classes were never enough for us. We ran to the newsstand to get *The Nation,* to see if we already knew what he was going to say or to read what he had not dared tell us. His criticism was always intelligent, informed, corrective, insightful, and substantial. For all the right reasons, his fellow critics asked him to be president of the New York Drama Critics' Circle in the 1940–41 Broadway season.

Although most critics can be discussed in the context of their evaluating instruments, which usually reduce to taste, Krutch can best be examined in the context of his vision of the human predicament. In his biography of Krutch, John

Margolis concludes that Krutch "had no procrustian critical bed upon which to force plays for analysis. . . . Krutch had various notions about the theater, but no grand critical system which consistently informed his writing." His "grand critical system," however, can be recognized in his uncertain romance with the universe; he was preoccupied with man's relationship to nature, which dictated his critical responses to his theatrical experiences. Early in his career he established what criticism should be: "an attempt to penetrate into the soul of a work and to discover what the author meant, how sincerely and passionately he meant it, and finally how true and important is his meaning."

The first two standards are an examination of the text or the performance, but the final test, the critical test, is what the critic thinks important to the human experience. How true and important indeed is the author's meaning to the living of a human life? Krutch applied this third standard in one of his very first theater reviews for *The Nation,* in 1924, when he wrote about *Desire Under the Elms,* in which he judged that O'Neill was "interested in an aspect of the eternal tragedy of man and his passions, the eternal struggle between aspirations and frustrations. . . . He set himself a task which was different in kind not degree from that which the contemporary playwright commonly undertakes."

For O'Neill, Krutch's criticism was also different in kind rather than degree. During the period in which O'Neill was writing and Krutch was criticizing, the prevailing American aesthetic was established in 1917 by the statement announcing the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the most coveted prize for American playwrights: "a prize to be given annually for the best original play to be performed in New York, which shall best represent the educational value and the power of the stage in raising the standard of good morals, good taste, and good manners." The contemporaneous European aesthetic was not that different. In 1919 in *The Changing Drama,* Archibald Henderson articulated what he believed was taking place throughout the Western world in dramatic writing: "The prime function of the dramatist of today is to bring man to the consciousness of his responsibility and to incite him to constructive measures for social reform." In neither statement was there any mention of art, poetry, or vision.

O'Neill spoke for his subject as well as Krutch's when he declared in 1930, "The playwright today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it -- the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for

life in, and to comfort one's fears of death." Krutch told us that O'Neill told him in conversation, "Most modern plays are concerned with the relationship between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relationship between man and God." The difference is indeed dramatic. In 1948, Krutch told our class, "The meaning and unity of O'Neill's work lies not in a controlling intellectual idea and certainly not in a 'message,' but merely in the fact that each play is an experience of extraordinary intensity. . . ."

Such an aesthetic and such a vision would have seemed unlikely for a youngster fresh from Knoxville, Tennessee, who had lived a rather ordinary middle-class existence prior to his journey to New York City in 1915 to compete with apparently sophisticated classmates in the graduate program at Columbia. However, young Krutch had already had an experience of consequence while an undergraduate at the University of Tennessee which gave him courage if not comfort in his new unfamiliar surroundings. While chancing on *Man and Superman* by George Bernard Shaw, Krutch discovered in his first reading that "Anyone allowed to get into print could say such mischievously pertinent things." He later acknowledged that play as "the light which broke upon me on my way to Damascus." His observations of his own society inspired him to choose Restoration drama for his dissertation subject, which to his mind reflected the society of the twenties in the United States as much as that of England 1660–1725.

Krutch was indeed tuned in to his time, as *The Modern Temper* attests. Despite the cynicism and social upheaval he analyzed in that volume, Krutch was aware of an even more fundamental predicament of the human being, whose life was always at the mercy of a nature that doomed the aspirations, wishes, hopes, and dreams of the human spirit to frustration. The tragedy for Krutch came with the battle of those passions. He was impatient with the universe -- although not at all with O'Neill -- in his review of a revival in 1926 of *Beyond the Horizon,* which had been O'Neill's first play and the first of three to win a Pulitzer Prize. Krutch wrote: "Divesting himself of every trace of faith in the permanent value of love and presenting it as merely one of the subtlest of those traps by which nature snares man, O'Neill turns a play which might have been merely ironic into an indictment not only of chance or fate but of that whole universe which sets itself up against man's desires and conquers them."

That tragic sense of life informed Krutch's existence all the way to Arizona, where he observed the nature of nature, and never lost his humility nor his wonder at the power of natural beauty. For O'Neill, his plays reflected his preoccupation with the

relationship of man to God; for Krutch, his writing and his life reflected his preoccupation with the relationship between man and nature.

One would assume that such a vision would lead its victim to a despair packed with gloom and doom. Not so with Krutch. Tragedy was not a matter of an unhappy ending, but instead the best reflection of the human spirit in its confrontation with the mysterious forces ultimately controlling human experiences. The human spirit had dimensions to be honored and respected, to be received with joy, hilarity, mirth, and admiration. In Krutch's *The Measure of Man,* he articulates the minimal requirements with which nature has endowed the human species: the capacity to be at least sometimes a thinking animal, the ability sometimes to exercise some sort of will and choice, and the power of making individual value judgments. These minimal requirements leapt from a man with a comic spirit as well as a tragic sense of life.

Krutch lived a life based on a description with which he captured the essence of Samuel Johnson: "He was a pessimist with an enormous zest for living." While O'Neill illuminated Krutch's pessimistic side, S.N. Behrman '18GSAS illuminated his comic spirit. When Krutch reviewed Behrman's *The Second Man,* he poured light onto how comedy is created. "The theme was the Comic Spirit itself and the hero a man forced to make the decision between the heroic and the merely intelligent which must be made before comedy really begins. Follow the emotions and you may reach ecstasy, but if you cannot do that, then listen to the dictates of common sense and there is a good chance that you will be comfortable -- even, God willing -- witty besides."

Behrman's plays, for Krutch, one after the other, extended the playwright's demonstration of the comic solution to the problem of civilized living. He placed him on the same level as he did O'Neill. "Mr. Behrman pays the penalty of seeming a little dry and hard to those pseudo-sophisticates who adore their tear-behind-the-smile because they insist upon eating their cake and having it too. Just as they giggle when they find themselves unable to sustain the level of O'Neill's exaltation -- unable, that is to say, to accept the logic of his demand that life be consistently interpreted in terms of the highest feeling possible to it -- so, too, they are equally though less consciously baffled by Behrman's persistent anti-heroism. Comedy and tragedy alike are essentially aristocratic; only the forms in between are popular."

This elitist response might have offended both Krutch's colleagues in the New York Drama Critics' Circle and his audience, but Krutch was never given over to meanness of spirit or to nasty, self-indulgent criticism. Margolis notes that "Krutch assumed no

license to make the review merely an excuse for writing an essay in which he could display his own brilliance." Nor did Krutch take pleasure in being negative or disapproving of a playwright's work. In responding to George S. Kaufman's plays, Krutch took considerable exception to their standard of excellence; but his most severe critical comment was tempered: "Once when he was asked why he did not write consistent satire instead of mere popular entertainment with half-satiric flavor, Kaufman is said to have replied, 'Satire is what closes Saturday night.' The remark is first-rate Broadway, and has been accepted as a genuine explanation, but I venture to say that it is not, at best, more than witty rationalization. Mr. Kaufman does not consistently write satire chiefly because he has never taken the trouble to consider what such satire would be."

It was Shaw's wit and intelligence that captivated Krutch while he was still an adolescent, and it was wit and intolerance that captivated Krutch as a graduate student concentrating on Restoration literature. Wit and tolerance are forms of beauty just as the passion and exaltation of the tragic hero are, and as such their own excuse for being. Comedy compensates for the lack of ecstasy by the cultivation of that grace and wit which no one can be too sophisticated to achieve: "Just as the tragic writer endows all his characters with his own gift of poetry, so Mr. Behrman endows all his with his own gift for the phrase which lays bare to the mind a meaning which emotion has been unable to entangle."

Krutch's American writer of tragedy, O'Neill, did suffer from a severely limited language. By his own admission, O'Neill recognized that his gift was cursed with only "a touch of the poet." Krutch's favorite American comedy playwright, Behrman, similarly did not always succeed. In his review of *Meteor,* Krutch wrote, ". . . a comedy-drama in which the playwright fumbled the intended effect for the very reason that he had, apparently, not thought the situation through to the point where it could be stated in purely intellectual terms." Krutch recognized limitations and weaknesses in his most admired playwrights, but he never let those weaknesses detract from the strength of their work. He responded to their strengths and carried their weaknesses on his back like a burden, the fate of a civilized human being.

Krutch's enthusiasm for and belief in the comic spirit emanated from his faith in human intelligence and reason: "Comedy first deflates man's aspirations and pretensions, accepting the inevitable failure of his attempt to live by his passions or up to his enthusiasms. But when it has done this, it demonstrates what is still left to him -- his intelligence, his wit, his tolerance and his grace -- and then finally it

imagines with what charm he could live if he were freed, not merely from the stern necessities of the struggle for physical existence, but also from the perverse and unexpected quixoticisms of his heart."

The result of cultivating such a perspective is explained in alternative terms by Carl Hovde: "Common sense of Krutch's kind is a poised alertness of the balanced mind, which can in turn move to the emotional extreme of proper tragedy, or to the restoration of order by comedy's departure from and return to the freshened values of the proper social order. However rare the playwright's capacity to do both at the highest level, the audience's capacity to enjoy both is the mark of a flexible and civilized mind." I would add that Krutch's gifts derived from what D.H. Lawrence called "an intelligent heart" and what Albert Camus deemed "a compassionate mind: the mark of an integrated human being, having cooperated with nature."

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