Arts & Humanities

Joseph Wood Krutch as a Cultural Critic

By
John Margolis
|
Summer 2000

Though he may well be remembered most for his remarkable nature writing, it was as a cultural critic that Joseph Wood Krutch gained his earliest recognition. Even as an undergraduate, Krutch understood that if he were to be more than a journalist, a mere dispassionate reporter of the passing scene, he needed to be a cultural commentator: he must assume a special angle of vision and offer a perspective that was, at least in part, contrary to the times. As editor of the University of Tennessee literary magazine, Krutch was eager in his monthly editorial essays to attract readership and to make his mark. Thus, eschewing such hackneyed topics as school spirit, he boldly addressed himself to rather more controversial matters such as liberal education and the prohibition of alcoholic beverages.

In one such essay—and with some apparent pride—Krutch noted that “the ideas presented in this essay do not fall in with the spirit of the times.” This studied distancing of himself from his era would characterize much of his social commentary in the decades to follow. In his undergraduate apprentice pieces, as in the writing to follow, Krutch the cultural critic was Krutch the dissenter—the observer of the parade of contemporary life who asked quizzically, and sometimes stridently, whether the emperor was in fact wearing clothes.

In 1924, after he completed his graduate study here at Columbia, Krutch joined the editorial board of The Nation and, as the author of unsigned editorials in that weekly, had the opportunity to practice further the craft of cultural commentary he had begun as an undergraduate in Knoxville. However, the anonymous editorial column was hardly an ideal genre for a young writer eager to make a reputation. Thus it was surely with eagerness that not long after becoming an editor of The Nation, Krutch

accepted the assignment to travel to Dayton, Tennessee, to serve as The Nation's correspondent on the Scopes trial there during the sweltering summer of 1925.

This son of Knoxville—who now enjoyed the urbanity of his Columbia Ph.D. and his Greenwich Village walk-up—was proud to announce in his dispatches that his standards were different from those of his fellow Tennesseans. There is no state of the Union, no country of the world, which does not have communities as simple-minded as this one," he wrote from Dayton. "If Tennessee has become the laughing stock of the world it is not because she has her villages which are a half-century behind world thought but rather because among her sons who know better there is scarcely one who has the courage to stand up for what he thinks and knows." Krutch was happy to count himself as one of those few.

For Krutch, the Scopes trial was a symptom of the vast gulf which lies between the two halves of our population"—benighted provincials and educated, sophisticated urbanites. In his dispatches from Dayton, as in much of his other cultural commentary in the twenties, Krutch aligned himself squarely with the latter. However, it was not primarily as a cultural commentator that Krutch gained recognition in the early years of his professional literary career. The Scopes trial had been a one-time opportunity for him, and his editorials in The Nation were unsigned.

Instead, he was, early on, best known as a book reviewer and drama critic; and in that capacity Krutch read scores of books and attended hundreds of plays. Whatever the artistic merit of those works—lucky if merely uneven—his reviewing fed his cultural commentary, as it gave him an opportunity to take a measure of the intellectual currents of the era. And he drew upon what he read and saw to inform the crafting of his most durable single work of cultural commentary, The Modern Temper, where Krutch offered a powerful—though selective—description of the drift of contemporary thought.

In the initial essay in that collection, which, like most of the others, was first published in The Atlantic Monthly, Krutch compared the development of civilization to that of a child. It is one of Freud's quaint conceits that the child in the mother's womb is the happiest of living creatures," he began. Even as an infant, the child finds the world generally compliant to his needs and wants. Soon, however, the child discovers with enraged surprise that there are wills other than his own and physical circumstances that cannot be surmounted by any human will. Only after the passage of many years does he become aware of the full extent of his predicament in the

midst of a world which is in very few respects what he would wish it to be."

Thus too, Krutch suggested, with civilization: "As civilization grows older, it too has more and more facts thrust upon its consciousness and is compelled to abandon one after another, quite as the child does, certain illusions which have been dear to it."

In the series of essays that followed, Krutch described the dilemma of modern man bereft of the comforts of poetry, mythology, and religion, and left only—in Krutch's view—with the sterile knowledge of nature.

Humanism, he suggested, was inevitably and unalterably opposed to the natural impulses, as revealed by science, which have made the human animal possible. If humanism had been rendered impotent by science, science itself offered no solace to the human spirit: "The most important part of our lives—our sensations, emotions, desires, and aspirations— takes place in a universe of illusions which science can attenuate or destroy, but which it is powerless to enrich." Love in this modern era, "has been deprived of its value." The power of tragedy too was diminished. "The death of tragedy," he wrote, "is, like the death of love, one of those emotional fatalities as the result of which the human as distinguished from the natural world grows more and more a desert."

In his essays on the modern temper, Krutch was not only describing—but also in some measure creating—the intellectual currents of the time. His book was a best seller when it appeared in 1929, and Krutch was much in demand as a lecturer. And his book, still in print today, became a canonical text for the understanding of what passed for the advanced thinking of his era.

But especially as one looks back on Krutch's career as a whole, it is difficult to escape the feeling that The Modern Temper was as much a dazzling intellectual and literary performance by a young writer on the make as it was a confession of Krutch's deepest feelings. In the heady days of the late twenties, just on the eve of the Depression, there was literary capital to be made by nay-saying in an era of optimism. Krutch's fundamental conservatism is no doubt implicit in his nostalgia for traditional values that he asserted modernism left enfeebled. But in The Modern Temper he luxuriated in his despair, resigned to his exquisite anguish.

In the thirties, however, Krutch's resignation was replaced by a spirit of resistance in his cultural commentary. Rather than climbing giddily onto the bandwagon of advanced thought, Krutch demurred from the leftist enthusiasms of his Nation

colleagues and—now writing with unmistakable conviction—published a series of essays in Harper's and The Nation that were collected in a small volume, Was Europe a Success?

Having traveled to the Soviet Union in the late twenties, he was deeply skeptical of the enthusiasm of many of his fellow intellectuals for the Soviet experiment; and the political hurlyburly of the thirties, with its impassioned Marxism, left Krutch distinctly cold. He wrote that in the early thirties he felt much as a cultivated Greek or Roman must have felt in the early days of Christianity when he "discovered with amazement that his most intimate friends were turning, one by one, to the strange new delusion. . . . I, too," he said, "have now witnessed the process of conversion. I too have now found myself faced with friends whose mental processes have come, overnight, to be quite incomprehensible and to whose vocabularies have suddenly been added words obviously rich with meanings which elude all my efforts to comprehend them."

To his rhetorical question, Krutch responded that—warts and all—Europe was a success and was not to be readily exchanged for a mess of revolutionary porridge. He insisted "upon the right to value some things which have no bearing upon either production or distribution" and he rejected the claims of the economist who "proclaims—in too familiar an accent—thou shalt have no other God but me."

For Krutch, the term "Europe" usefully summarized "the whole complex of institutions, traditions, and standards of value" too readily dismissed by the Marxist. He said, "Humanity as Europe knows it cannot be imagined apart from the social order which Europe has created, the sensibilities which European art has developed, and the realm of thought which European philosophy has set in order."

Krutch acknowledged that the average Russian was better off in the thirties than he had been under the tzar, but he noted that America had never had a tzar. And he insisted that there was little reason, even in the midst of an economic depression, to hope that a postrevolutionary America—divorced from its European roots—would be a better place. It is odd," Krutch noted, "that the only government which claims to have the good of its citizens at heart should also be the only one (except for fascist Italy and Nazi Germany) which finds it necessary to prevent them from escaping its jurisdiction. Surely," he concluded in the epigrammatic way that characterized his writing, "it is an odd Utopia which finds it necessary to lock its citizens in every night."

Not long after the publication of his commentaries on the political enthusiasms of the thirties, Krutch left the editorial board of The Nation and took his position on the Columbia faculty in 1937. His writing now was not that of the periodical journalist but rather that of the university professor. And it was not until he retired from Columbia to Tucson in 1952 that Krutch once again turned his hand seriously to cultural commentary. But in his intense engagement during his Columbia years with the lives and works of Samuel Johnson and Henry David Thoreau—two men about whom he wrote masterful critical biographies—Krutch found confirmation of perspectives that would powerfully inform the two decades of social commentary that, along with his nature writing, would distinguish the final phase of his career.

Krutch noted that Johnson, like Krutch himself in his essays on communism, “genuinely believed that the current was running so strongly in one direction that someone ought to say what could be said against the prevailing tendency.”And Johnson brought to his observations a quality that could be said to distinguish much of Krutch’s social commentary as well: common sense. “Common sense,” Krutch explained in his book on Johnson, “was the acceptance of certain current assumptions, traditions, and standards of value which are never called into question because so to question any of them might be to necessitate a revision of government, society, and private conduct, more thoroughgoing than anyone liked to contemplate.” It was just such common sense that so clearly characterized Krutch’s later social commentary.

In a similar fashion, from Thoreau Krutch gained confirmation of his temperamental apoliticism, of his conviction that man had freedom of choice and was not a victim of determinism—and, of course, that the natural world was charged with far more human meaning than Krutch had allowed in The Modern Temper.

Many of these convictions came together in his book, The Measure of Man, which received the 1954 National Book Award for nonfiction. The book was conceived as a reassessment of the modern temper Krutch had described 25 years before; and it was, in the end, Krutch’s repudiation of the anguished defeatism that marked the earlier study. Now informed by his patient observations of the non-human natural world of plants and animals, Krutch insisted that two of man’s distinctive human characteristics were his ability freely to choose one thing over another and his capacity to create and act upon values.

The social sciences, he insisted, took at best a partial measure of man. “The methods employed for the study of man,” he said, “have been for the most part those originally devised for the study of machines or the study of rats, and are capable, therefore, of detecting and measuring only those characteristics which the three have in common.” Human consciousness may not lend itself to quantification in the laboratory or examination by questionnaire, but the commonsense evidence of experience shows it to be “the one thing which incontrovertibly is,” Krutch insisted. “To refuse to concern ourselves with it is to make the most monstrous error that could possibly be made.”

As with much of the social commentary that would follow in Krutch’s Tucson years, The Measure of Man was less an effort to affirm a fully formulated set of principles or convictions than it was an effort to examine critically many widely held but too rarely questioned assumptions. He looked not to convert his readers, but rather to challenge them.

Looking back in the fifties on his earlier career, and thinking of The Modern Temper, for which he was best known, Krutch commented:

“I thought I was an intellectual because of the number of things I did not believe. Only very slowly did I come to realize that what was really characteristic of myself and my age was not that we did not believe anything but that we believed very firmly in a number of things which are not really so. We believed, for example, in the exclusive importance of the material, the measurable, and the controllable. We had no doubts about what science proves’ and we took it for granted that whatever science did not prove was certainly false. . . . The trouble was not that we were skeptical but that we were not skeptical enough.”

As a public thinker and an essayist in the fifties and sixties, Krutch exhibited this skepticism as he examined a variety of developments in contemporary life and thought. His goal was not, as earlier, to establish himself as an advanced thinker, as a spokesman for the latest intellectual fashions. Instead, from his desert home in Tucson, he cast a skeptical eye upon the passing scene and recorded his observations in familiar essays.

As a regular columnist in the Saturday Review and The American Scholar and as a contributor to many other periodicals, Krutch addressed himself to a wide variety of topics—aptly summarized by the title of a popular 1959 collection, Human Nature

and the Human Condition. He considered topics as various as our infatuation with progress and its handmaiden technology; the shallowness of our values and the tawdriness of our man-made surroundings; the environmental dangers of pollution, overpopulation, and diminishing resources; the modesty of our aspirations (as seen, for example, in such institutions as schools and churches); the responsibility of the intellectual; and the spiritually paralyzing and artistically pernicious influence of modernism. Many of these essays were collected in two volumes. The title of his American Scholar column—“If you don’t mind my saying so . . . became the title of one of his two collections of these cultural commentaries. The other was And Even If You Do. Both titles suggest the engaging, sometimes tentative, generally modest approach Krutch brought to his reflections.

In such earlier commentary as The Modern Temper or his essays on communism Krutch had ambitiously endeavored to address himself expansively to major intellectual currents of the time. Now—perhaps conditioned by his new interest in nature and his years of patient observation of the most mundane of natural phenomena—he addressed the particular rather than the general.

“Even a casual reading of newspapers and magazines will keep you constantly supplied with new occasions for pet indignations,” he remarked. And the inspiration for his scores of essays during these two decades was as likely to be an article in TV Guide as a treatise in some scholarly journal—as likely a friend’s casual remark as the pronouncement of some noted public figure. As in his nature writing, where he found unexpected implications in familiar but unexamined natural phenomena, Krutch in his later social commentary addressed himself to random, quotidian specimens of contemporary life and asked us to join him in examining their implications.

Though the sweeping, self-assured, ex cathedra judgment of his earlier cultural commentary was replaced by a familiar and personal tone, and though he now wrote easily in the first person, Krutch no more now than before offered final answers to the questions he raised. His role was that of a gadfly, a doubter and questioner, rather than an advocate for this or that point of view. He was less interested in persuading his readers to accept some novel ideology than in stimulating them to measure, as he had, the current fashions in thought, taste, and behavior against an implicit standard of common sense.

Having himself set aside, earlier in his career, the dictates of common sense to make a stunning literary effect, the older—not to say wiser—Krutch, writing his cultural commentary from Tucson, became a widely heard voice of common sense—an avuncular figure, who mused on the passing scene and quietly remarked, “If you don’t mind my saying so . . .”

The many readers of his widely published essays minded not at all.

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