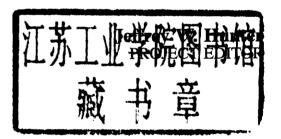
☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 243

Volume 243

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers







Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 243

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Contemporary Literary Criticism

Preface

Named "one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years" by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*) series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today's reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in CLC inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author's career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author's works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A CLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The Author Heading cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Singlework entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A Portrait of the Author is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief Annotations explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent Author Interview accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of Further Reading appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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Michael Cunningham 1952-

American novelist, screenwriter, and nonfiction writer.

The following entry presents criticism on Cunning-ham's career through 2006. For additional information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volume 34.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps best known for his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel The Hours (1998), Cunningham is widely respected for his poetic prose style and skillful narration. While critics have discussed his early work in the context of homosexual literature, comparing him to fellow gay authors David Leavitt and Paul Monette, the mainstream press has since recognized him, as did commentator Richard Eder in 1995, as "perhaps the most brilliant of the many novelists who have dealt with gay themes over the past dozen years, and one of our very best writers, in any case, on any theme." In a body of fiction that encompasses five novels, Cunningham has chronicled the gay male experience during the AIDS epidemic, investigated the complexities of and alternatives to contemporary American family life, and explored the power of art to connect, inspire, and transform. His intricate craftsmanship and profound message about the possibilities of literature prompted reviewer Robert Plunket to place him among the "rarest of writers, combining intellectual and emotional depth with an astonishing command of technique."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Cunningham was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on November 6, 1952. During his first ten years, his family moved frequently to accommodate his father's advertising career; they eventually relocated to La Cañada, California. Cunningham enjoyed literature throughout his teen years, yet became acquainted with the writing of Virginia Woolf only in an attempt to impress an intriguing girl in high school. His exposure to Woolf had a profound impact on the way he viewed literature and writing: "[Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*] just nailed me; I've thought about it almost constantly ever since." he told *Publishers Weekly*. He pursued his liter-

ary studies in college, receiving a B.A. in English from Stanford University in 1976 and an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa in 1980. Cunningham published a handful of short stories in the early 1980s and his first novel, Golden States, was published in 1984. Golden States was ignored critically, and Cunningham rarely mentions this novel, often referring to A Home at the End of the World (1990) as his first. He was granted a Guggenheim fellowship in 1993 and received a Whiting Writers' Award in 1995. That same year, his third novel, Flesh and Blood (1995), won the Lambda Literary Award. He was the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in 1998. His acclaimed novel The Hours garnered both the PEN/ Faulkner Award for Fiction and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and was subsequently adapted as a major motion picture. Although he provided occasional uncredited assistance during the making of the film, his first screenwriting endeavor was for the cinematic adaptation of A Home at the End of the World, released in 2004. In 2005, he published Specimen Days, his first novel since The Hours. Cunningham is a professor of creative writing at Brooklyn College. He resides with Ken Corbett—his partner since 1988—in Greenwich Village, and vacations in Provincetown, Massachusetts, the community represented in his travel guide Land's End (2002).

MAJOR WORKS

Cunningham's first novel, Golden States, centers on twelve-year-old David and his journey toward adulthood. As the only male in the household, he is protective of his mother and two sisters, and through the course of the novel becomes a stabilizing force within the family. Set in southern California in the early 1980s, Golden States examines non-traditional family dynamics and the delicate balancing act of keeping the American family together. This theme is further explored in A Home at the End of the World, which traces the friendship of Bobby and Jonathan, two boys from Cleveland who become inseparable friends and occasional sexual partners. Upon reaching adulthood, Jonathan, a homosexual, moves to New York City and becomes roommates with Clare, developing an emotionally intimate, yet platonic, relationship. When Bobby moves to New York and joins them, he and

Clare fall in love and Clare becomes pregnant with Bobby's child. The trio move upstate to Woodstock in an effort to create their own version of the American family, an endeavor that ultimately fails. Clare and her daughter move out upon the arrival of Jonathan's former lover, Erich, who is dying of AIDS. At the novel's conclusion, the men forge a new family unit as Bobby and Jonathan care for Erich in his final days. Through the shifting narrative perspectives of the book's main characters, the book reveals Cunningham's preoccupation with the fragility of intimate relationships and the evolving definition of family. Flesh and Blood is an epic novel about four generations of Greek Americans and their pursuit of happiness. Although the family appears, on the surface, to be the standard middle-class American household, the characters are revealed to be dark, dysfunctional, and unable to live within the confines of the traditional family. Constantine, the patriarch, is physically and sexually abusive; his wife, Mary, is a kleptomaniac who abuses prescription drugs. Eventually, they divorce, and their three children leave home to carve out lives of their own. Susan engages in an extramarital affair and conceives a son, Billy enters into a homosexual partnership, and Zoe experiments with drugs and sex, becoming involved in an interracial relationship that leaves her pregnant and HIV-positive. Zoe raises her child, Jamal, with the help of Cassandra, a transvestite living with AIDS. Cunningham portrays these alternate family arrangements as stronger and more fulfilling than the conventional suburban ideal, emphasizing the individual choices that the family members make in creating their contemporary home environments.

A meditation on suicide and living, The Hours is an homage to Woolf and her novel Mrs. Dalloway. The novel begins with a prologue depicting Woolf on the day in 1941 when she ended her life by filling her pockets with stones and walking into a river, fearing both artistic failure and madness. The subsequent narrative follows three women through a single day in their lives. The first section focuses on a day in 1923 as Woolf struggles with the first sentence of *The Hours*, her working title for the book that will become her seminal novel Mrs. Dalloway. She considers the plot of her novel as she hosts a visit from her sister Vanessa and Vanessa's children and tries to convince her husband that she is ready to return to London after a period of recuperation in the countryside. In the second narrative, Laura Brown, a young housewife in 1949 Los Angeles, is planning a birthday dinner for her husband. The mother of a young son and pregnant with a second child, Laura seeks an escape from an unfulfilling and mundane existence. Leaving her son

with a babysitter, she checks into a hotel and spends two hours reading Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. Although she is on the brink of a nervous breakdown and possibly suicide, Laura decides to return to the everyday moments that comprise her life, cognizant of the option to end it. The third section is a modern-day retelling of Mrs. Dalloway, portraying a day in the life of Clarissa Vaughan as she plans a party in honor of her friend, Richard, an acclaimed poet who is dying of AIDS. Clarissa, like the character of Mrs. Dalloway, begins the day at the florist, and proceeds with preparations for the party to be held in her Manhattan home. When Clarissa arrives at Richard's apartment to bring him to the party, Richard throws himself out the window to his death, explaining that he cannot bear to face "the party and the ceremony, and then the hour after that, and the hour after that." At Richard's funeral, it is revealed that his mother is Laura Brown, who had abandoned him decades earlier. The novel concludes with a message that emphasizes the joys of daily life.

Like The Hours, Specimen Days is a three-part novel presented in three different historical periods. Set in Manhattan during the Industrial Revolution, the present day, and a dystopian future, the novel shares its title with Walt Whitman's 1882 autobiography. Correspondingly, the work is informed and haunted by Whitman's vision of America, and quotations of his verse are interspersed throughout it. Cunningham's three main characters are reinvented in each section, serving as doppelgängers of their other incarnations in the novel. The first section, "In the Machine," is the story of Lucas, a deformed adolescent who falls in love with his brother Simon's fiancée after his brother's untimely death by an iron works machine. Set around the turn of the twentieth century, "In the Machine" features gothic horror undertones. A modernday thriller, "The Children's Crusade" concerns a group of child suicide bombers-including another character named Lucas who spouts bits from Whitman's Leaves of Grass in his bomb threats—and Cat, the forensic psychologist trying to make sense of the terrorist acts. The third section, "Like Beauty," is a science-fiction story set 150 years in the future. Representing the antithesis of Whitman's view of America and the promise of democracy, this section depicts New York as a theme park in a post-nuclear wasteland inhabited by androids programmed to mimic human behavior and reptilian aliens from the planet Nadia. The three protagonists, Simon, Catareen, and Luke, are seeking a new life on another planet. The novel addresses recurring themes in Cunningham's oeuvre, namely the difficulty of separating literature from life, one's self from others, fantasy from reality,

and the past from the present. Along with his novels, Cunningham has written the screenplay for the film adaptation of *A Home at the End of the World* and a travel guide of Provincetown, Massachusetts, entitled *Land's End*.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have regarded Cunningham's fiction as provocative, original, and exquisitely crafted, praising his vivid characterizations and rich, imaginative prose. Although some question the merits of his theme concerning alternatives to the American nuclear family, commentators concur that he is among the most formidable literary talents in contemporary literature. Reviewers laud his use of alternating narrative perspectives in A Home at the End of the World and Flesh and Blood, though some criticize the latter work, deeming Cunningham's characterizations twodimensional and detecting a lack of depth and focus in the novel. The critical response to The Hours, however, proved to be overwhelmingly positive, with critics marveling at the intricacy and beauty of Cunningham's writing. "[W]hen a novelist has the right stuff," writes reviewer Brooke Allen, "he can endow literally any subject with truth, poetry, and intelligence. Likewise, commentator Richard Eder describes the novel as "a kaleidoscope whose four shining and utterly unlike pieces—the lives of two fictional characters, of a real writer, and her novel-combine, separate and tumble in continually shifting and startlingly suggestive patterns." Scholars further analyze the influence of Woolf on Cunningham's literary aesthetic, reflecting on the roles of writer, reader, and fictional character in The Hours and Mrs. Dalloway. Similarly, commentators interpret The Hours as a meditation on the process of reading and a cultural translation of Woolf's novel. Other critical studies highlight Cunningham's foregrounding of the homosexual subtext underlying Mrs. Dalloway and explore the notion of celebrity in both books in terms of its cultural significance to the time and place depicted therein.

Additionally, critics examine water-related imagery in *The Hours* as a means of connecting the novel's characters and central themes. For example, critic Mary Joe Hughes investigates the function of water symbolism in Cunningham's novel as it relates to the metaphor of "the plunge" in *Mrs. Dalloway*, arguing that through water imagery, Cunningham was able "to expand on the permeable boundaries between life and death that Woolf explores and on the widening circles that connect one person or event to another, moving toward the uncharted horizon." In response to Cunningham's much-anticipated novel *Specimen Days*,

critics applauded the author's ambition, characterizing the book, as did a reviewer in *Publishers Weekly*, as "daring, memorable fiction." Additionally, they have noted the influence of Walt Whitman and the events of September 11, 2001 on the novel's scope and subject matter. Regarded by readers as a profoundly affecting and humane author, Cunningham has likewise captivated critics with his lush, poetic fiction, through which, according to reviewer Darlene E. Erickson, he "has helped us grasp the importance of goodness, beauty, love, and art."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Golden States (novel) 1984
*A Home at the End of the World (novel) 1990
Flesh and Blood (novel) 1995
The Hours (novel) 1998
Land's End: A Walk through Provincetown (nonfiction) 2002
Specimen Days (novel) 2005

*Cunningham wrote the screenplay for the film adaptation of A Home at the End of the World, which was released in 2004.

CRITICISM

Richard Eder (review date 18 November 1990)

SOURCE: Eder, Richard. "Squaring a Triangle." Los Angeles Times Book Review (18 November 1990): 3, 12.

[In the following review, Eder praises the care and expertise with which Cunningham shaped the characters of A Home at the End of the World, describing the author's narration as intimate and insightful.]

How do we tell a destination from a dead end? The three waifs in Michael Cunningham's splendidly inflected novel struggle to find their way in a contemporary world whose neglect of its own moral maintenance has left it as overgrown and trackless as a jungle.

The world's end of the title is ostensibly an old farmhouse in upstate New York where Bobby, his one-time lover, Jonathan and his present lover, Clare, have moved in order to put their confused lives into shape. It has a darker meaning. We finish the book with a

sense of Doomsday. Not the catastrophe itself, but the instinctive unease that precedes it, as when cats agitate seconds before an earthquake, or like the feeling of despair before heart attacks.

The trio that moves through *A Home at the End of the World* has the instability of a musical-chairs variation, where there are two chairs for three players and, by turns, one of them is always left standing. Back in Cleveland, Jonathan, who is gay, and Bobby, who is uncertain, were a high school couple. Jonathan grows up, moves to New York and meets Clare. They live together, loving but necessarily platonic.

Bobby, drifting, joins them. The loving now goes three ways, but no longer platonically. Bobby and Clare become lovers and she lets herself become pregnant. Jonathan flees briefly but returns. He needs them and they need him.

Clinging together, all three move to the country. Bobby and Jonathan open a restaurant, and Clare has her baby. Motherhood pulls her bit by bit to the edge of the circle; partnership pulls Jonathan and Bobby closer.

At the end, she leaves with Rebecca, her baby. Bobby and Jonathan are together once again, but in a minor key. They share the care of Erich, a one-time lover of Jonathan's, now dying from AIDS. Jonathan waits stoically for his own symptoms to appear.

Jonathan's homosexuality, Bobby's passive bisexuality, Clare's basic heterosexuality are a conspicuous part of this community at world's end, but they are not the essential part. Each of the three has arrived war-damaged from the half-acknowledged harms of contemporary society; each has lost the underpinnings of structure, direction and commitment; each struggles to invent a replacement.

The trio is what they come up with. Sexuality apart, no permutation of Jonathan, Bobby and Clare can make a genuine couple. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke once hinted at the requirements in his poignant and terrifying definition of marriage. He called it that state in which two people become "guardians of each other's solitude."

To be a coupled solitude in a society that offers some kind of place for each one of them, and some kind of link among them all, is hard. In a falling-away world it is immeasurably hard. Cunningham's three waifs join together to escape individual aloneness; the magnified aloneness of the couple is starker and more demanding than any two of them can bear.

Cunningham writes with power and delicacy of his three characters, of the raft they swim to from their three early shipwrecks, of the raft's breakup and the courage each begins to learn alone: Clare with her child, Jonathan and Bobby together but in a scaled-down companionship.

The two men are the most vividly drawn; we begin with them as children, and although *End of the World* [A Home at the End of the World] is beautifully written throughout, Cunningham is at his best with childhood. Both boys are injured early, Bobby by far the more grievously.

With two self-absorbed ex-hippie parents who never have grown up, Bobby becomes the enthralled follower of his troubled older brother, Carlton. At 8, he joins Carlton in drinking and taking drugs; he watches him have sex with a girlfriend, and assumes, from her cries, that it must be a painful thing to do. Later, when Clare seduces him, he will wail at orgasm. Pleasure—the drugs—followed by unbearable pain is his first lesson; he sees Carlton die in a grisly accident at home, and not long afterwards his mother kills herself.

As an adolescent, half-orphaned, wild and passive at the same time, he meets Jonathan. More gently brought up, Jonathan has a home, and Bobby takes refuge there. But Jonathan has been through his own, quieter desert. His father is kind but evasive; at 4, Jonathan longs passionately for him—Cunningham gracefully shows a little boy's early fascination with male bodies—but can't find him. His mother, on the other hand, is enveloping.

The author makes us see the wildness of Bobby's childhood as something both familiar and natural; he makes us feel the sorrowful wilderness in Jonathan's far more gentle deprivation. He does not stress the connections in any forced fashion. If Jonathan retains a sense of himself and grows up an injured but determined passionate seeker, and if Bobby, more fundamentally injured, grows up passive, it seems absolutely right.

Cunningham gives us the most complete and nuanced of psychological portraits without abridging the freedom of his characters. All three are utterly revealed and utterly unpredictable. A thread leads from the child to the adult, but it is not a binding one; it can break, disappear and be taken up again. We come to feel that we know Jonathan, Bobby and Clare as if we lived with them; yet each one retains the mystery that in people is called soul, and in fiction is called art.

Clare is no less real for standing a little way out of the foreground. Her childhood is not so fully sketched; she is more mysterious than Bobby and Jonathan, and thus more able to provide the abrupt energy that moves the story. She is in her late 30s, 10 years older than

her companions. If she seems as appealingly flaky as the others, she is driven, half-consciously, by a fundamental motherhood that comes to determine what will happen to the trio.

It is, of course, a trio of needs as well as of persons. Bobby's passivity needs to attach itself to a source of strength and energy. Jonathan's energy needs to create a world around him; most fundamentally, he needs to be a father, and his homosexuality stands in the way.

Clare's need is akin to Jonathan's but she is able to fulfill it. She chooses Bobby to make her a mother. And once she is a mother, she can no longer avail herself of the refuge, the escape from fundamental choices provided by this comically warm and funky ménage à trois in upstate New York. Lovable and userfriendly to the ultimate degree, it is producer-hostile and as stifling as any unduly prolonged childhood must be.

Clare leaves to grow up; Bobby stays to grow as much as his shattered childhood will allow. Dependent on an older brother-figure—Jonathan—he will develop an independent serenity inside this dependence. Jonathan's growth is the hardest. The trio was to be his family. He was touchingly serious about being a second father to Rebecca, Clare's and Bobby's child. It is a moving illusion: but Cunningham makes the relinquishing of the illusion far more moving.

Accepting his role as mainstay to Bobby and as nurse to the dying Erich, accepting the probability that he will not live long, accepting the bar that his sexual nature places upon his need to make a family, and accepting, finally, his solitude, Jonathan comes authentically and originally upon life.

Danny Karlin (review date 23 May 1991)

SOURCE: Karlin, Danny. "Home-Breaking." London Review of Books 13, no. 10 (23 May 1991): 22-3.

[In the following excerpt, Karlin lauds Cunningham's prose in A Home at the End of the World, but argues that the author's view of the social shift away from the traditional nuclear family is not as widely held as the book suggests.]

A Home at the End of the World is a novel which fully deserves the acclaim it has received in America for the boldness of its imaginative design and the beauty of its writing. Cunningham's style is at times too 'fine', too insistently conscious of its richness, but few enough writers have the resources to make such a qualm possible. Cunningham's descriptions have an

air of the inevitable; he has the ability, in Conrad's words, to make you *see*. Jonathan, one of the book's central characters, describes as a child his parents coming home from hospital after the still-birth of his sister:

My father wept. He had never before shed a single tear in my presence and now he cried extravagantly, great phlegmy sobs that caught in his throat with the clotted sound of a stopped pipe. Experimentally, I placed my hand on his forearm. He did not brush it off, or reprimand me. His pale hairs sprouted up raucously between my fingers.

As the novel progresses we will recognise this combination of dry apartness and yearning tenderness to be Jonathan's keynote.

It is for such pleasures alone (and the book is prodigal of them) that I found A Home at the End of the World worth reading: but the book makes other and larger claims. Jonathan's is one of the two voices through which the story is mainly told; the other belongs to his friend Bobby. The two men grow up in Middle America and emigrate to New York, each of them with a messy family romance dragging at their progress like a psychic limp. Jonathan, who is gay, lives with Clare, who is not; when Bobby (hitherto neutral) joins them, he and Clare fall in love and have a child; then they all set up house together, in upstate New York as opposed to New York City, attempting to re-found the family on new ground and new terms. It is a peculiarly American project, summoning to mind earlier versions of American pastoral and visions of American utopia; and, though it fails, the aftermath of this failure, unlike others which the book has depicted, is forward-looking and free of trauma. Normality, as expressed by the traditional family structure in which each of the characters has been trapped either by inclusion or exclusion, has been finally dismantled or simply outlived; they all, and Jonathan especially, whose voice concludes the story, are free to affirm their autonomy and selfhood. As Jonathan puts it, in the novel's final and perhaps rather too heavily epiphanic scene,

I was nothing so simple as happy. I was merely present, perhaps for the first time in my adult life . . . I would not die unfulfilled because I'd been here, right here and nowhere else.

Cunningham wants this outcome to seem not just believable and moving, but symbolic of a whole order of events, a fundamental shift in social values. David Leavitt has praised the book for this 'historical largeness', for telling 'the story of the Seventies and Eighties in America': the story, in other words, of the unmaking of the traditional family, with its gender and