

Letters

be trying to come to grips with what they love. With all his rhetorical power, Mr. Barzun might do well to write another essay, one for us young readers and readees, one about the value of cool-headed restraint in critical housecleaning. There's babies in that bathwater, dude.

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Matters of Sense and Opacity

To the Editor:

I enjoyed Jacques Barzun's essay "A Little Matter of Sense" (June 21). Doubtless the inflated jargon of some contemporary criticism perpetrates a kind of double fraud: a critic trying to sound smarter than he is; a critical piece whose demands on readers' patience and dictionaries are out of all proportion to reward. But there are serious problems in Mr. Barzun's position—one whose common-sense surface barely covers a reactionary and kind of reductive approach to the issue of "sense" in technical esthetics.

Literary criticism is itself an artistic endeavor, and will naturally sometimes sacrifice transparency for creative richness; literary theory, on the other hand, is a branch of esthetics, which is essentially philosophy, and is often engaged in honest efforts at such rarefied heights that things are going to get unavoidably abstract and technical; literary criticism and theory, by their natures, operate in dialogue with art, with each other, and with themselves; such a tangle of reference and referents cannot but lead to some occlusion and prolixity. It's the price of admission.

That there are serious opacity problems in criticism is clear. What ought to be done about them, and to what degree, is less so. "A Little Matter of Sense" was not rife with corrective options. We may indeed erect a primer-ish set of "sensible" critical terms and insist that good critics adhere to standard usage. Or we may, as readers and critics and writers, work to expand the semantic and esthetic horizons of the terms we now possess—as the late (and surely offensively oblique) Paul de Man did when he revolutionized theoretical discussions about metaphor and allegory by pointing to deep contexts of their use that no simple field guide to criticism could countenance.

Mr. Barzun's essay was funny, erudite and level-headed. Exaggerate his stance just a bit, though, and you risk getting a dull Ockham's razor. Not all theorists are trying to erect walls of impenetrability around the very stuff they're trying to penetrate. Some might just