

The Tortoise and the Hare

- [Dean Biron](#)
- [Respond to this Article](#)

Volume 8 | Issue 5 | Oct. 2005

¹ Of all the characteristics that may be emphasised by those seeking to set apart the serious, authoritative critic from the inconsequential, workaday reviewer, perhaps the most fundamental is the liberty typically enjoyed by the former. So, while the celebrated literary critic F.R. Leavis (in *The Great Tradition*) is able to confidently assert in microscopic detail the comparative merits of Lawrence, Joyce, Conrad and Woolf, what Meaghan Morris (106) calls the "gulp it down, chew it over, throw it up" crowd strive (in no more than five hundred words and by close of business today, thanks very much) to explain why John Grisham's latest tome will turn either heads or stomachs. Amongst reviewers, not surprisingly, one can find hugely varying levels of competence and principle. But when it comes to contemporary music, where the art of the review continues to be practiced across a wide range of media, there are many commentators who would deem the virtues of competence and principle irrelevant to begin with.

² These critics can be grouped into two distinct camps. On the one hand, it has long been argued that discussions of music (popular or otherwise) are intrinsically flawed if they eschew technical analysis. Thus Wilfrid Mellers, in his 1973 book *The Music of the Beatles: Twilight of the Gods*, states that "descriptive accounts of music cannot be valid unless they are based on what happens in musical terms" (15). In what amounts to a variation on Mellers's theme, cultural studies analysts have largely studied popular music as "an expression of rebellion, subversion, resistance and critique" (Regev 258), thereby supporting the view that the sounds themselves cannot be discussed with any authority outside of musicology departments. In this way the virtues of Madonna (and, largely due to her extra-musical activities and role in the development of the video clip, it almost always was Madonna) could be couched in terms of ideological meaning without the need to negotiate the awkward terrain of aesthetic content (Frith 14). At the same time, those few critics who shared Mellers's technical grounding were poking at the alien specimen that is contemporary music with an entirely different set of instruments, but more or less the same results – that is, conducting no doubt useful but ultimately bloodless examinations. A prime example of this is William Echard's amazingly meticulous musicological/semiotic dismantling of Neil Young's "Powderfinger", from which it is nonetheless impossible to discern whether the author actually *likes* the song in question.

³ However, a second arm of criticism has been even more dismissive of modern music writing. Because here is where Michael Bywater, Martha Bayles, Roger Scruton and others conclude, by implication, that there is no value in such practices for the simple reason that there is essentially no aesthetic value in contemporary music, *period*. This school of thought, emanating from a lonely island fortress mired in a perceived sea of mass-cultural pollutants, takes Frankfurt School culture industry critique to its (il)logical nadir by roping off high culture from its insidious, ubiquitous opposite and claiming entire genres, such as popular music, to be inherently anti-intellectual: "Pop is surface all the way down. The musical toolbox contains only surface instruments – rhythmic thud, punch, whine and whop – and the emotions, too, are superficial" (Bywater 44). On this thinking the new Eminem record, for example, is seen as part of a phenomenon to brood over rather than as a distinct artefact worthy of thoughtful evaluation.

⁴ Both strands of critical thought – the first locking contemporary music inside the musicology building, the second dropping it in the garbage can outside – are characterised by the kind of uncompromising, one-way dialogue Robert Dossaix describes as "excluding". This style of argument, even when meritorious, ensures that anyone who approaches from outside certain scholarly circles is "silenced – but not by respect for authority" (129). It also calls to mind another commonly cited distinction between critic and reviewer (discussed in Morris 108-9) – a superiority of knowledge and taste that defines not only the serious critic but also the limited scope of his or her audience. Although the popular press, too, has its fair share of didactic prose, Dossaix's theory does suggest where the worth may lie in an oft-maligned occupation like record reviewing. While non-academic music writers must endure likely time and word

limitations, the twin criticisms of abstraction and irrelevance, *and* the tedious old "dancing about architecture" cliché, at least there is some chance they will invite "complicity in an unexpected adventure" (133) by deftly treading that fine line between expert and enthusiast.

⁵ Whether plotting a course through English literature à la Leavis or discussing the latest batch of Scandinavian death metal albums, it would be churlish to claim that the role of critic/reviewer is not a legitimate one: the impossibly vast array of cultural productions accessible to the modern-day audience make some form of "expert" guidance indispensable. So, as new music tumbles down upon us like an endless monsoonal rain, thousands of fans masquerading as journalists (or, more frighteningly, journalists masquerading as fans) dutifully strive to sort the releases of the past week, year or decade into some semblance of order ... and, as with all criticism, the judgements they come up with are only part of the story. The greatest trick a reviewer (and when referring to the practice of "reviewing" one trusts that at least some degree of editorial control is involved – read the customer comments at Amazon.com and weep) can master is to convince the reader that his or her piece of creative non-fiction is a minor work of art, whilst simultaneously putting forward a lucid argument to the effect that the object under scrutiny is (or isn't, as the case may be) a valuable one. And, despite the endless kilometres of formulaic and/or sycophantic copy that clog review columns in newspapers, magazines, and on innumerable Web-sites, it does happen every now and then.

⁶ In *Spin* magazine's review of the year 2000's musical landscape, Jon Dolan provided the following capsule review of P.J. Harvey's fifth album, *Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea*:

⁷

Chapter V: Polly Gets Her Gun. But it's not the return to true grit that makes this her best record since she was Jesus with PMS; it's that whereas the old stuff took your head off, this rewires your guts. All the beautiful bullshit's here – pathetic fallacies, Patti Smith mythopoeia, a Thom Yorke duet – but it's more earned, more cathartic. Sand in her joints. Wind through her hair. Blood on her tracks.

⁸ What I believe Dolan achieves here is a near-perfect amalgamation of instruction and art. He doesn't ram his analysis down our throats – to discover how he feels about Harvey, the writer assumes you actually might know something about her yourself: her approximate location on the rock family tree (the Patti Smith allusion is indirect, yet perceptive); that she has been brilliant before (this record merely presenting a new type of brilliance); that at its best her music is complicated and unconventional, furious and revolutionary. The subtlety of the writing evokes shared connections for those familiar with the artist's recorded output, at the same time inviting neophytes to come and see what all the fuss is about. Not only do the last three sentences summarise Harvey's resolve, free will and intensity in thrillingly-eloquent prose, but the oblique Bob Dylan reference invites readers to consider complex associations across space and time whilst implicitly recognising their ability to figure out those associations for themselves. And all of this in well under one hundred words.

⁹ Dolan's seamless, perspicacious set-piece is evidence that, in all forms of art, the informal-yet-intelligent review can stand alongside the meticulous, highly-ritualised assessment of the academically-situated critic. Of course serious criticism has an important role but it certainly doesn't have a monopoly on intelligent writing, and besides, there are some aesthetic pleasures that are only enhanced by a less pretentious style of analysis. Or, as P.J. Harvey herself puts it on *Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea*: "I can't believe life's so complex/when I just want to sit here and watch you undress."

¹⁰ The art of the entertaining, insightful review is alive and well in creative non-fiction; you just have to sort through a considerable amount of chaff to find it.

References

Bayles, Martha. "Body and Soul: The Musical Miseducation of the Youth." *Public Interest* 131 (1998): 36-49.

- Bywater, Michael. "Never Mind the Width, Feel the Lack of Quality." *The Spectator* 13 May 1995: 44-5.
- Dessaix, Robert. (& *So Forth*). Sydney: MacMillan, 1998.
- Echard, William. "An Analysis of Neil Young's 'Powderfinger' Based on Mark Johnson's Image Schemata." *Popular Music* 18.1 (1999): 133-44.
- Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Leavis, F.R. *The Great Tradition*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948.
- Mellers, Wilfrid. *The Music of the Beatles: Twilight of the Gods*. New York: Schirmer, 1973.
- Morris, Meaghan. *The Pirate's Fiancée*. London: Verso, 1988.
- Regev, Motti. "The 'Pop-Rockization' of Popular Music." *Popular Music Studies*. Ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus. London: Arnold, 2002. 117-30.
- Scruton, Roger. *Aesthetics of Music*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1997.

Citation reference for this article

MLA Style

Biron, Dean. "The Tortoise and the Hare." *M/C Journal* 8.5 (2005). 17 Mar. 2009
<<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0510/05-biron.php>>.

APA Style

Biron, D. (Oct. 2005) "The Tortoise and the Hare," *M/C Journal*, 8(5). Retrieved 17 Mar. 2009 from
<<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0510/05-biron.php>>.