

## George P. Elliott

ROBERT BRUSTEIN

I learned of George P. Elliott's death last May in the course of a conversation with our friend, Robert Pack, who thought I knew. Actually, I did not know that he had been dead for more than two weeks because there was no obituary in the *New York Times*. The failure of our major American newspaper to take note of the passing of one of our more significant writers has more than the obvious irony, since George had been ignoring the *Times* for years. Still, it was also a melancholy commentary on the fickle, fragmented nature of our literary culture. George lived for over a decade in Syracuse, out of the swim of New York, teaching in an academic English department where he also served for a time as chairman. He had written almost every day of his adult life—even when he visited friends for a weekend he insisted on spending the morning at a borrowed desk—but despite his reputation in certain circles, despite the large number of books he had published in his lifetime, he had been unable to find a publisher for his later works. It can be argued that he had not fulfilled his early promise as a writer of fiction, but nothing George wrote was without value, and his essays remained as perceptive and brave as ever. It was simply that he had fallen, quite precipitously, out of fashion.

George resented this, with a cold, icy anger that showed itself in the corners of his warm mouth. But there is no question that he had also sought it. Midway through his life, at the height of his reputation, on the threshold of a wider recognition, George made a conscious

decision to refuse celebrity. This was a moral determination, as most of George's actions were, undertaken both to chasten himself and to rebuke his colleagues. George was a proud man—he often identified pride and gluttony as his major sins—and more than anything, he wanted to pull down vanity. But there is no question that he hated the vanity of others as much as he detested his own, and the obscurity he chose for himself was partly intended as his commentary on a corruptible literary world.

I first met George P. Elliott in 1955 when we were both teaching in the English department at Cornell. It was my first teaching assignment after seven years of graduate work. Although I had written a couple of book reviews for *Commentary*, George—one of the first fiction writers I had met—had already published a number of short stories. Some years older than I, he was then an assistant professor who obviously loved literature and understood society. I immediately claimed him as an intellectual father. Although somewhat reserved by nature, George responded to me with warmth and tolerated my hero worship with amusement. We ate lunch together every day in the restaurant of the hotel school where George—a large man, much given to good food and good wine—provided a running commentary on the experimental efforts of the student cooks when he was not discoursing on literature and the times. Before long, I was invited to dinner at his house, where I met his handsome, rawboned wife, Mary Emma, a talented writer, a sensitive editor, an extremely gracious hostess. I was as struck by the ease of their domestic life as I was by George's calm and maturity and human understanding. He seemed to possess the wisdom and patience which I, in my rash early years, so sorely lacked, and his conver-

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sation was invariably a form of genuine nourishment for my hungry mind.

Before long, I found myself in a position to bring my appreciation of George's gifts to a wider public. I persuaded *Commentary* to let me review his first long work, a novella called *Parktilden Village*. The book was about an amoral sociologist who does research on comic books; as a result, he starts to produce a successful comic strip of his own, destroying a few young lives along the way. Like all of George's work, *Parktilden Village* was informed by a strong critical viewpoint, particularly his conviction that by analyzing mass culture without making judgments on it, the social sciences were helping to erode the moral and social values of contemporary America. The book also contained the seeds of a later concern of George's, his criticism of the way some artists and intellectuals were surrendering their own values for the sake of advancement—a process that has now become so widespread that we don't even notice it any more. Besides its moral passion, the book contained eloquence and simplicity; George was quickly establishing himself as one of those rare souls who knew how to dramatize a literary idea.

George's short stories had the same harmonious mix of passion and thought; one of the ways he achieved this was through the conventions of science fiction. Among the more memorable of these futuristic moral tales were "Sandra" and "The NRACP," both included later in a volume called *Among the Dangs*. "The NRACP" carried America's current racial problems to a horrifying conclusion. The benign-sounding "relocation of colored people" turned out to be the incarceration of blacks in a closely guarded prison compound, where they were first exterminated and then turned into canned dog food by their captors. In "Sandra," George imagined a future in which it would be possible to buy female slaves in department stores. By gradually granting his slave privileges, the hero eventually ends up cooking her food and making her bed—a fictional metaphor that anticipated by about ten years the current concept of the male housewife.

In addition to stories, novels, and poems, George was writing essays at this time; the earliest of these were collected in a volume called *A Piece of Lettuce*. In some ways, I

found George's essays even more congenial than his fiction; they were certainly more original, because in them George was effectively developing a new prose form. George's customary procedure was to start with some biographical anecdote—usually concerning his boyhood on an Indiana farm—then to move on impressionistically to a more general discussion of literature and society. This process of alternating between reminiscence and criticism always struck me as a dazzling way of balancing the perceptions of the reflective observer with the object under scrutiny. And since George handled this balance with tact and discretion, the biographical element was never an intrusion, always a revelation.

In "A Brown Fountain Pen," for example, George described how his father, a fastidious man, retrieved his son's first pen from a privy, thus determining not only George's decision to become a writer but his future attitudes toward reason, determinism, and mysticism. In "Getting Away From the Chickens," he told how the experience of having a hen lay an egg in his mouth influenced his later approach to poetic symbolism. And in the title essay, he linked his memory of a time when a piece of lettuce lodged in his baby brother's eye with his own impressions of Tolstoy and the "law-obeying, mediocre world."

The first lines of these essays display their unusual nature: "When I was eight or nine determinism came to me in the form of a flight of arrows." "The day I turned three I learned how important it was that I had been born on my mother's birthday." "The famous inalienable error about happiness is proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence." "The first time I tried to come to age, my sinews turned to butter and my father threw me." The quotidian topic sentence leads gracefully into the supple anecdote, then into a sagacious generalization on literature or society—a method that has yet to be honored through imitation or celebration.

Included in the same volume is an essay called "Who Is We," George's first direct blast at the bastions of the New York intelligentsia. Hitherto reflective in his prose and Horatian in his satire, George turned Juvenalian in this piece—a change which suggests how deeply the subject affected him. What was eating George is immediately obvious in the tone of his opening paragraphs, where

he satirized what he called the “tend- and trendency-spotters” of the day.

Present-day Americans are engaged in a regular tidal wave of a movement to keep on doing what they’re doing and not be *we*—that is, not to contribute intellectual articles to *Partisan Review*, etc., not to be connected with Columbia (or with NYU, CCNY, New School, Hunter, Fordham, Brooklyn, Queens, Union Theological, Jewish Theological, or the Julliard School of Music).

Following this, George got more personal, attacking Diana Trilling, Eric Bentley, Mary McCarthy, Allen Ginsberg, and Leslie Fiedler (particularly)—the most celebrated of the 107 *we*’s (by George’s estimate) who were currently announcing what everyone else in America was supposed to think. “By a strange cooptation,” he added testily, “they form a club from which provincials east, west, north, and south feel excluded. . . . New York is the chief source of power—i.e., reputation, publishing, money—and *we* are in on the ground floor. Advice to up-and-coming young intellectuals: Get yourself born in New York City and if you’re a woman be chic; in any case, wherever you’re from, even if you’re dowdy and Michigan, attend Columbia and get yourself invited to certain parties.”

A writer newly based in New York and teaching at Barnard, George was attempting to act as spokesman for another group of “*we*,” the disenfranchised, intelligent people in other parts of the country whose ideas and tastes were being dictated to by a small clique of intellectuals in a single cosmopolitan center. On the face of it, George’s purpose was sensible—to urge everyone, including the “*we*” intellectuals, to think for themselves—that is, to trade the “*we*” for “*I*.” Still, there was something in the tone of the piece—a note of resentment and irritation, perhaps—that was in excess of its purpose. Worse, the essay seemed to suggest that New York publishing and New York intellectual life were dominated mostly by Jews from New York universities; and whatever the truth of this charge, it was bound to trigger a strong reaction, if not a suspicion (unfounded) that George was secretly anti-Semitic. At best, the essay was dismissed as the sour grapes of an outsider—which proved George’s point. But it resulted in a new hostility toward this *Hudson Review*-oriented,

Barnard-centered Hoosier which caused some unpleasantness on social occasions.

Like most of us (*we*), George was ambivalent about his standing in the pantheon of New York literary life. The resentment he was arousing first saddened him, then angered him, then helped to determine his future. In a way, the publication of “Who Is We” was as fateful for George as the publication of *Making It* was for Norman Podhoretz. It certainly had a similar influence—perhaps part of an unconscious plan—on the decisions of his life. These inevitably found a geographical expression, which was already implicit in the essay. For George had now resolved to leave his comfortable post at Barnard—to abandon the literary parties, the publishing contacts, and the weekly volleyball game we played together—and return to Berkeley, where he had spent his earliest years as a writer. When he later moved East again, settling down in the English department of Syracuse, he was a changed man.

One change I noted was a new defensiveness in regard to his work. As a teacher of writing, George always knew how to give criticism; as a writer himself, he also knew how to take it. In the past, George usually welcomed comments from his friends; now he seemed to avoid them. When I went to Yale and started a theater there, George sent me a play, a long epic work about the Byzantine Empire. It reminded me of Hardy’s *The Dynasts* in its lack of dramatic economy, and the dialogue was not really speakable. I don’t know why, but George had not been able to transmit his enthusiasm for the period to the reader. I tried to tell him this as gently as I could, suggesting that he publish the work in book form. I tried to be tactful; I was already sensing how sensitive he was to rejection. I offered to discuss the work with him at greater length during a visit I was planning to Syracuse. George replied with a gruffness that was not characteristic: “I am of course sorry that you reject my play. I have no use for a play which is only to be read—such a closet drama is nothing. . . . Since I find the whole matter very painful, I would prefer not to talk about it while you are here in March.”

My failure to respond properly to his Byzantium drama created some tensions that affected our future relations. Another source of tension was what George considered my dan-

gerous sympathy for certain movements in culture, particularly the influence of Antonin Artaud. George had emerged from the sixties with a new combativeness, his native middle-American conservatism expressing itself in a scorn both for political and cultural radicalism. He didn't share the sympathy of the liberal middle class for the women's movement, and he had even less patience for the revolutionary talk then popular in the university. But George's opinions were still modified by a warm humanity. In a brilliant essay, "Revolution Instead," he balanced his support for those who opposed the Vietnam War with fury at those who proposed to oppose it violently, thus charting for many of us the difficult course we were trying to steer between resistance and revolution.

But when he collected some of these essays in a book called *Conversions*, it was barely noticed as a publishing event, except as a symbol of a reactionary temperament. George sent me the volume with a most curious letter in which he said that while he knew I was indifferent to his ideas, he hoped they were eloquently enough expressed to affect my own. I read the book immediately with a great deal of pleasure and agreement, and wrote to him of my admiration. But his letter again suggested how sensitive he had grown toward the opinions of others. He seemed eager for combat, ready for rejection. I learned that he was quarreling with some of his closest friends. Our own quarrel was settled, but our relationship remained uneasy. Although I visited him and Mary Emma a few times in ensuing years, and our correspondence continued unabated, I always sensed something guarded in our communications.

The last time I saw George was when he accepted my invitation to come to Yale in 1976 and lecture our students on Chekhov—a writer for whom we shared a mutual and deep admiration. I had met him again the previous summer, after a long period of separation, when Bob Pack asked me to come to Breadloaf with my wife to talk about American playwriting. Breadloaf was important to me that summer, and not just because of the opportunity it offered to renew my friendship with George. Coming from the hothouse atmosphere of theater, with its competitive rivalries and omnipresent *schadenfreude*, I was surprised and delighted at the generosity that

the Breadloaf poets and novelists typically displayed toward one another's work.

George was at the center of this authorial generosity. By this time, he had grown a beard, speckled with gray, which gave him a grandfatherly mien, and the young writers treated him like a patriarch. As a matter of fact, George was now a grandfather, his daughter, Nora, having given birth to a boy in Berkeley. George usually referred to the child as "Jacob Cohen," no doubt amused at finding himself with a half-Jewish grandson. At Breadloaf, he was tanned, relaxed, and healthy, and our friendship was renewed amidst the cordial working conditions of that lovely, bucolic writer's retreat.

George came up to Yale the following autumn. His talk to our students was beautifully formulated, passionate, profound. I was reminded again how much this gentle, moral man had in common with Chekhov, the subject of his lecture. After my wife had served him a good dinner, complete with a French wine which he savored for hours, George packed up and returned to Syracuse to continue work on the Byzantium novel that nobody wanted to publish—the fictionalization of a play that nobody wanted to produce.

George P. Elliott left behind him four novels, two collections of short stories, two books of essays, and a fine narrative poem called *Fever and Chills*. In time, these works will be properly assessed and George's contribution to our literature celebrated. What will possibly not be fully appreciated immediately is the extent of the sacrifice he made to be an American writer. George loved the things of the world and, like the failed monk he was, flagellated himself for it. He wanted fame, and arranged his life for obscurity. He wanted recognition and banished himself from the seat of the awards. He wanted to influence his time and ended up isolated in an academic English department. George continually struggled with the appetites of his soul as he struggled with the appetites of his body. The struggle exacted its toll on him, and it certainly affected his good nature, but although such a struggle is never exactly won, there is a kind of victory in the fact that it continues. George continued it until the day he died, and that may be his greatest legacy. For is not a moral creative life—in our celebrity-smitten age—the equivalent of a work of art?