

OPEN FORUM

Creating Beauty in Our Lives: A Folklorist Responds to Christopher Caldwell and George Will

William "Bert" Wilson

Editors' note: This piece was originally published in AFSNews (Feb. 1999) as "Misquotes and Misfires: William Wilson responds to Christopher Caldwell and George Will"; all references to times (e.g., "last year") should be read as such. Special thanks to Dr. Wilson and the editors of AFSNews for allowing us to reprint it.

Well, I've made the big time. In today's paper (*Desert News*, April 5, 1998), I was quoted by the conservative George F. Will in his syndicated column. The summer before last I participated in a forum in Salt Lake sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts. In a project called "American Canvas," the NEA held regional forums around the country, focusing on different themes at each forum. The Salt Lake meetings focused on the arts as a means of improving family life and education. After the conference I wrote up the things I had said under the title "Arts and the Family," and the Utah Arts Council published them in *Ovations* (Fall 1996). I sent the article to NEA as part of the follow-up report I was to make after participating in the Salt Lake forum. Gary O. Larson synthesized all the reports from the various forums in *American Canvas: A Arts Legacy For Our Communities*, published last year by NEA, and cited several passages from my article.

In February of this year, Christopher Caldwell wrote an article called "Arts for Politics's Sake," published in the conservative *Commentary* and attacking the goals outlined in *American Canvas*. Deploring the breakdown of the distinction between "high" and "low" culture, "in favor of the latter," he decries NEA's more inclusive approach to the arts. "This," he says, "is certainly what the Clinton administration had in mind in recently naming William Ivey, a folklorist and the head of the Country Music Foundation, to succeed the outgoing Jane Alexander as head of the NEA." To underscore

his point that folklorists can be trusted only to dumb down our culture, Caldwell quotes from a passage Olson had quoted from me:

We must move away from the notion that art can be found only on the museum wall, at the concert hall, or on the performing stage. We must understand that art includes the expressive behaviors of ordinary people...things that we make with our words (songs, stories, rhymes, proverbs), with our hands (quilts, knitting, rawhide braiding, pie-crust designs, dinner-table arrangements, garden layouts), and with our actions (birthday and holiday celebrations, worship practice, playtime activities, work practices).

Caldwell conveniently omits, with the use of ellipsis, the important phrase in which I had argued that we should look at the expressive behaviors of ordinary people "as they respond creatively to the circumstances of everyday life." From Caldwell's perspective there can be no creativity among ordinary people. During the rest of the article, he scorns using art for such social causes as improving children's school performance, preventing crime, and contributing to the quality of life. All these efforts, he claims, are part of President Clinton's program of "mainstreaming the agenda of the Left, wrapping it in the uplifting mantle of populism, and coopting as many sources of real or potential opposition as possible." He concludes that for the NEA these efforts mark "a pitiful coda to the career of a now hopelessly corrupt institution."

Picking up where Caldwell leaves off, George Will argues that both the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities have taken a populist road to survival. Once again he quotes me, this time with the same omission as in Caldwell but without benefit of elliptical marks. He also drops any reference to me as the author of the passage and instead makes the NEA the author of my words, as though I were some sort of synecdoche for the entire organization. As does Caldwell, Will deplores the "embarrassing embrace of cultural democracy" in which all can participate and gives as evidence of our downward drift the appointment of folklorist William Ferris as head of NEH and folklorist William Ivey as head of NEA. Immediately following the quotation from me he writes:

Everything from singing in your morning shower to setting your dinner table is eligible for NEA support, which makes it easy to spread support, like honey on bread, across 435 congressional districts. The chairman of the NEA, William Ivey, is a folklorist.

Will, of course, gives no support for his argument. He merely refers to the expressions of ordinary people in mocking tones and assumes that all

right-thinking people will see that such expressions can have no artistic merit. He argues that both NEA and NEH will exclude nothing from their purview and will devote their efforts to studying and supporting “mundane things [simply] because they are ubiquitous.” No one I know would make the ridiculous claim that everything created by ordinary people is of equal artistic merit—that would be as foolish as saying that all novels, symphonies, and ballets are equally good. During the four years I spent on the NEA Folk Arts Panel, one year as chair, we did pay heed to the social implications of the grants we awarded, but at center stage was always our concern with artistic quality. One need look no further than Steve Siporin’s *American Folk Masters: The National Heritage Awards* for ample demonstration of the NEA’s concern with aesthetic excellence.

Will continues in the same vein throughout his article. He ridicules the notion that by studying food one can learn a lot about regions. And he derisively holds up for public scorn the following statement by Ferris:

Today the lives of ordinary American people have assumed a place beside volumes of European classics in the humanities....We must recognize those voices which seldom touch the printed page. A sharecropper in Alabama and a steelworker in Indiana have a voice in the humanities. Their view of truth and wisdom complements traditional learning in a new and exciting way.

Will completely misses the point that the new approaches suggested by Ferris “complement” rather than “replace” traditional learning. As one who has spent much of his life promoting what Caldwell and Will would probably accept as art, I am put off by their pseudo distinctions between high and low culture and by their assuming an either/or approach to the arts: either we can have William Shakespeare or we can have Ray Hicks, but we can’t have both. Nonsense! That’s like saying you can enjoy a vegetarian meal or you can enjoy fried chicken, but you can’t enjoy both. In our pluralistic, multicultural country, the greater variety of food we can put on the plate, the richer will be our lives—to say nothing of our honoring the long-ignored artistic traditions of many of our citizens.

Neither Caldwell or Will seems capable of recognizing artistic excellence in any but the established artistic canons (what a simple-minded approach that is: if it’s in the canon it must be good). They fail to realize that the artistic impulse resides not just in a privileged few but is inherent in the species, one of the few forces that separate us from the rest of the animal kingdom. Realizing that ordinary men and women everywhere have moved beyond necessity to create beauty in their lives ought to be cause for rejoicing not denigration.

Aside from the fact that both Caldwell and Will jerk people's words out of context and distort them to drive home their own ideological agendas, the most disturbing thing about them is their cynicism, their inability to comprehend that some people might really prefer to act in other than self-serving ways. As they question the motives of others, they are, I fear, simply listening to the beatings of their own jaded hearts. They can't comprehend that some people might want to take a more inclusive approach to the arts because these people genuinely believe that the canonical approaches of the past have overlooked art of great significance and ignored artists of great accomplishment. As a result, Caldwell and Will have to explain a broader approach to the arts as nothing more than a populist attempt to win the financial support of Congress and to serve mean ends.

I will never apologize for my own democratic approach. I am proud to belong to a profession that values the equal worth of all people and respects and honors their artistic efforts. I only regret that we have done such a poor job of getting our message across that we have left columnists like Caldwell and Will free to speak glibly and irresponsibly—and with impunity—about art worlds of which they are largely ignorant.