Some authors earn their oblivion. In matter and style they never think beyond the accidents of the age that gave them notice, and when that day passes, so do their names. Others who ought to enjoy a wide and continuing audience nevertheless fall away from view, usually because the mind or habits of a succeeding generation suffer a significant cultural dislocation. Few, for instance, have heard now of Agnes Repplier, yet not that long ago—and for fully sixty years—she was widely recognized as unexcelled among American essayists.

Essayist, critic, and wit, from her first published writing in 1886 until her death in 1950 Agnes Repplier dominated non-fiction prose with a rare combination of a generous mind and a satirical eye. Sadly, the advent of television, the intellectual tyranny of “experts,” and the abolition of leisure (replaced as it has been by both frenetic work and frenetic recreation) did to American postwar literary culture what a wrecking ball does to a neighborhood library. Repplier was quickly lost to view.

Born in 1855, Repplier was a Philadelphian of German Catholic extraction whose life, according to Lukacs, “was solitary, vexatious, and long.” Her family struggled against straitened finances while Agnes’s mother apparently made little effort to conceal her distaste for children and domestic life. (Over breakfast she once remarked on the fifteen-year-old Agnes’s complexion, “You look like a leper that has had smallpox.”) Agnes, for her part, learned to read later than most children, but then read prodigiously and brought to her books an astonishing memory. Her experience of school was marred by a tumultuous will that resulted in several expulsions. In one instance, the young Repplier was asked to read a book she disliked and she responded...
by slamming the book to the floor. She was expelled that day.

Repplier remained unmarried and spent much of her life supporting and caring for her older sister and a half-paralyzed brother. It was, apparently, an unhappy trio, taking its meals together in near silence. Nevertheless, she did not consider herself unhappy and, though pressed into writing by financial need, she embraced the craft enthusiastically. Her vast reading and sharp intelligence had found in prose a natural home, and it was in her writing that Repplier clearly lived. She came to know and associate with the likes of Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, Henry James, Owen Wister, and Andrew Lang. She routinely published in the Atlantic Monthly, and her work often appeared in Harper’s, the New Republic, Commonweal, America, and the Yale Review as well. By the time of her death, she had been awarded numerous honorary doctorates.

Lukacs insists that Repplier’s writing changed little over the sixty years of her active career—one does not find a declining mind or an author imitating herself as so often happens after a long career in print. More remarkable, perhaps, is her freedom from the baroque stylistic flourishes that characterize so many who learned to write in the nineteenth century. Her prose is artful and supple, to be sure, and her sentences unafraid of complexity. Yet her style enjoys a clarity and classical poise that lightens its movement. Speaking of the famously raunchy stage comedy of the English Restoration, Repplier remarks, “There is no shadow of a doubt that the rakish society of the Restoration began by tolerating indecency for the sake of wit, and ended by tolerating dullness for the sake of indecency.” Quite typically,
such judgments bear a thinly disguised contemporary relevance without losing any of their historical acuity. When, in turn, she writes of things contemporary to herself, they usually resonate in our own times as well. Repplier’s pointed if amusing complaint on the rise of suburbs, for instance, has a familiar ring:

Professional men, doctors and dentists especially, delight in living in the suburbs, so that those who need their services cannot reach them. The doctor escapes from his patients, who may fall ill on Saturday, and die on Sunday, without troubling him. The dentist is happy in that he can play golf all Saturday and Sunday while his patients agonize in town. Only the undertaker, man’s final servitor, stands staunchly by his guns.

Repplier loved cities, urban life, European travel, and France in particular. Denunciations of city life amidst exhortations to return to Nature have a very long history and were well known to Repplier. She was not sympathetic. “A vast deal of abuse has been leveled against cities; and the splendor of the parts they have played has been dimmed by a too persistent contemplation of their sins and suffering.” Then, in a pithy formulation of a rather sophisticated argument, she continues, “It is hardly worthwhile to speak of city life as entailing ‘spiritual loss,’ because it is out of touch with Nature. It is in touch with humanity, and humanity is Nature’s heaviest asset.”

Her love of the civitas in “civilization” should not be confused with cosmopolitanism, however. Repplier excoriates jingoism that is blind to foreign excellence, but then describes the core “Americanization” immigrants must embrace if they are to take possession of a sustainable liberty. She is impatient of patriotic foolishness, quoting Walter Hines Page in illustration: “God has as yet made nothing or nobody equal to the American people; and I don’t think He ever will or can.” “Which,” she then remarks, “is a trifle fettering to omnipotence.” But she has equally harsh words for those who refused to honor the American soldiers who fell in the First World War. “You cannot make the word ‘freedom’ sound in untutored ears as it sounds in the ears of men who have counted the cost by which it has been preserved through the centuries. . . . How can justice live save by the will of freemen? Of what avail are civic virtues that are not the virtues of the free?”

Lukacs takes pains to demonstrate Repplier’s unsentimental (and uncynical) realism, often on display in her wit. This is all the more remarkable because a certain lavish sentimentality was, in Repplier’s younger days, the royal road to publication and income. In one famous postwar incident, a fellow dinner guest was moved by benevolent enthusiasm to exclaim, “Mark my words! You’ll all live to see the day when the German Army and the British Army march arm in arm down Chestnut Street!” This rapturous vision of universal brotherhood was met with an awkward silence, until Repplier leaned forward. “‘Oh, dear Mr. Pennell,’ she said slowly and distinctly, ‘do have them come down Pine Street. Nothing ever happens on Pine Street.’” However light, deft, or wry her humor, she never wastes it on a mere effect but always hones her point. “A collective opinion has its value, or at least its satisfying qualities. For one thing, there is so much of it.” Repplier’s wit grasps the real value of humor—its great task is to expose or express shades of meaning accessible by no other means.

In her literary judgments Repplier relies on no arbitrary theoretical screen through
which works are pressed. Instead, close attention to texts, the times, the author’s biography, and the conventions of his day, as well as the constants of the human soul, results in understandings both substantial and delicate. Of Thackeray, for instance, she concludes that “humor was a moral emancipation, and cynicism a delicate adjustment of reflection to experience. . . . He never heard the aphorism of Santayana: ‘Everything in nature is lyrical in its ideal essence, tragic in its fate, and comic in its existence’; but he knew these things in his day as well as the philosopher knows them in ours.” Then, in what might stand for Repplier’s literary credo: “We learn and we laugh, and what better things are there in the world for us to do?”

It is a strange genre, really, the essay, poised between journalistic contingencies of the moment and philosophically enduring human concerns. Lukacs draws attention to Repplier’s grasp of history as a “form of literature, but also a form of thought.” The essay, too, is a form of thought, a form that some now argue is in resurgence. We shall see. But if this form of thought is again something that we care to make a vital part of a reflective life, we shall have to acquire intellectual habits less polemical, less assertive, and (paradoxically) more knowing, more sure of our judgments because more sure of their foundations. We shall have to become better read, more content to learn, willing to be surprised, and content to converse. One needs a critical mass of readers for whom truth is to be wooed and won rather than seized and dragged. If such a readership can be achieved, then Agnes Repplier will again be reckoned great in the halls of American letters.

“The Jane Austen of the Essay.”
—NEW YORK TIMES

John Lukacs has compiled a definitive and delightful reader of the best writing of this most unjustly forgotten prose stylist.

Replier emerges as perhaps the Wittiest female author in the history of American letters.

PRAISE FOR AMERICAN AUSTEN

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