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The New Criterion

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April 2013

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Starred Review

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a new collection of poetry from

David Yezzi

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"ASTONISHING"

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"George Green is an ingenious poet"

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"Full of wit, lore, and extraordinary twists"

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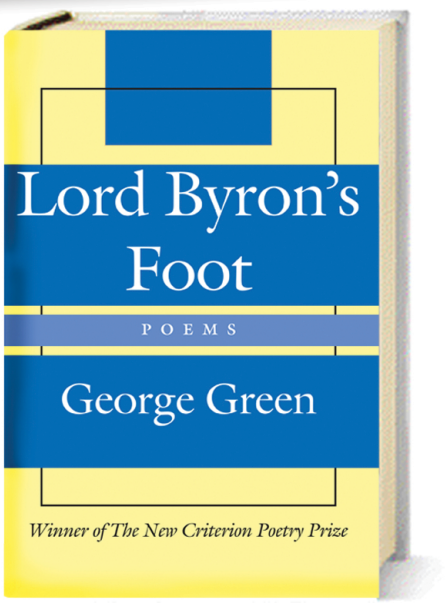

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Notes & Comments
April 2013

Free speech in Britain

It is seldom, David Hume once observed, that liberty of any kind is lost all at once. It ebbs away slowly in barely noticeable diminutions until, suddenly, it is gone. Consider free speech. It is difficult to remember not only how rare it is as a historical phenomenon—how long and bitter of achievement—but also how fragile. A visit to any college campus will convince you that, in this country at least, free speech is much more curtailed today than it was, say, fifty years ago. The range of subjects that are entirely *verboten*, or about which it is permissible to have only one opinion, is large and growing. Political correctness, combined with the illiberal instincts of most of those calling themselves "liberals" today (and the spinelessness of those superintending the institutions), accounts for that curious deformation.

But free speech is under serious assault in other citadels of freedom as well. England is the cradle of modern political liberty. Since 1695, when the 1662 Licensing of the Press Act was not renewed by Parliament, it began to nurture a fourth estate conspicuously free from official government censorship (the preferred word today is "regulation," which to some ears sounds softer than "censorship"). It wasn't until 1765 that the power of the secretary of state to haul an author or proprietor of a newspaper before the Star Chamber was declared illegal. Since that time, the British press has been gloriously, and sometimes ingloriously, rambunctious, delighting in scandal, airing the dirty laundry of ministers and other worthies with cheery abandon, checked chiefly by Britain's strict libel laws.

All of that is about to change. In the wake of serious journalistic malfeasance, in which reporters illegally hacked into mobile phone accounts to retrieve messages, there has been a hue and cry among some enemies of liberty to curtail the freedom of the press. The fact that the journalists were preying on celebrities—ministers, the Royal Family, movie stars—was bad enough. But the incident that really sparked widespread outrage was when journalists left messages on the mobile phone voice mail of a girl who had been abducted and murdered, thus giving her parents false hope that she was still alive while giving the twisted reporters a melodramatic story to splash over their front pages.

Public outrage followed and coalesced around the activities of Labour politicians eager to muzzle the press and an activist group called Hacked Off, whose most prominent spokesman is the actor Hugh Grant (a chap who has had reason to rue the energetic scandal-mongering of the press). A formal commission, overseen by Lord Justice Leveson, was convened at the end of 2011. Lord Leveson began the proceedings by assuring the public that "The press provides an essential check on all aspects of public life. That is why any failure within the media affects all of us. At the heart of this Inquiry, therefore, may be one simple question: who guards the guardians?"

On March 18, the British public got its answer. After various late-night confabulations among Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Tory

officials, Prime Minister David Cameron announced that it would be the Guardians who would be guarding the Guardians. He was not, he insisted, attempting to govern the press by legislation. He had merely agreed to setting up an official newspaper regulator, replete with enabling legislation, under a Royal Charter. While you endeavor to understand how that differs from empowering the state to censor the press, you will be gratified to learn that Mr. Cameron, after repeatedly promising not to give in to Labour and Lib Dem demands that the Press be subject to statutory oversight, merely gave in to demands that the press be subject to statutory oversight. Only we mustn't call it statutory oversight. Perhaps they should just call it a "Licensing of the Press Act" and be done with it. Who still knows about its predecessor?

The phone-hacking scandal was deplorable. What those reporters did, and what their editors condoned, was despicable as well as illegal. It is right and just that those responsible are facing prison sentences. Nevertheless, the journalist (and Mayor of London) Boris Johnson is also right that "only a gutter press can keep clean the gutters of public life." In less colorful language, we might say that freedom of all kinds is subject to abuse. That is the price of freedom, which is appropriately paid not be abolishing freedom but by holding accountable those who abuse it. James Madison, commenting on the First Amendment in his "Report on the Virginia Resolutions" (1800) put it well. "Some degree of abuse," Madison observed,

> is inseparable from the proper use of every thing, and in no instance is this more true than in that of the press. It has accordingly been decided by the practice of the States, that it is better to leave a few of its noxious branches to their luxuriant growth, than, by pruning them away, to injure the vigour of those yielding the proper fruits. And can the wisdom of this policy be doubted by any who reflect that to the press alone, chequered as it is with abuses, the world is indebted for all the triumphs which have been gained by reason and humanity over error and oppression.

Behind all the sanctimonious rhetoric of the campaigners for curbs on freedom of the press is the menacing countenance of state power. Abuses of freedom there will always be. But Madison was right: they are preferable to the abuse of power that follows the forfeiture of freedom.

A warning from Cyprus

Seldom is liberty of any kind lost all at once. A fundamental bulwark of liberty is private property. As we write, the EU's plan to impose a special one-time (only this once, promise!) tax on Cypriot bank deposits (a most private form of private property) in exchange for a bailout of €10 billion is making anxious headlines everywhere. Somehow, the bureaucrats responsible for this species of government-sanctioned theft (one bureaucrat called it a "solidarity levy") did not foresee what the less exalted of us could have predicted: near panic and a run on the banks. The Cypriot government first forbade wire transfers, then declared a bank holiday for a few days while they decide how to contain the damage.

Now, the banking establishment in Cyprus is famously, indeed infamously, corrupt. It's where Russian gangsters (the press for some reason calls them "oligarchs") go to launder their ill-gotten gains. The EU plan took aim at those unsavory types, proposing to ding anyone with a deposit of more than €100,000 9.9 percent. The poor slobs with less than €100,000 were to be whacked 6.75 percent on their supposedly insured deposits.

As we write, the details of the deal are up for grabs. The Cypriot masters, and their masters in Brussels, are nervously attempting to forestall panic. Maybe they'll whack the bigger depositors more than 9.9 percent and ease up a bit on the small fry. The rest of Europe watches anxiously. The economist John Allison, writing at the Unioholdings.com blog, suggests that the actual financial effect of this statist raid on private property will be minimal. Cyprus is too small a player to matter much. He believes that the psychological effect of the levy, if it happens, will be larger but containable. The real significance of the episode, he suggests, is as a symptom of the bifurcation of the EU between north and south, between (our formulation, not his) the makers and the takers.

We think Mr. Allison is right that the real importance of the Cyprus affair is symptomatic. But, we fear, it goes beyond the almost inevitable divergence of the productive North from the unproductive South. Even more worrisome is its status as a symptom of the erosion of the safeguards protecting private property, which in the end means the safeguards protecting individual liberty. If EU bureaucrats can dip their hands into private savings, what is beyond their reach?

A farewell to Pope Benedict XVI

As the world celebrates the election of the Argentinian Jesuit Jorge Bergoglio to the Papacy, we'd like to add our voice of welcome to Pope Francis. We'd also like to take a moment to commemorate some of the cultural achievements of his predecessor, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. The Catholic Church, though rocked by scandals over the past decade, has also had the stupendous good fortune—or perhaps we should say that it has enjoyed the workings of a beneficent Providence—in its last two Popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, both of whom were intellectual giants. Their effect on the life of the Church and of ordinary Catholics was large and salubrious. And the resonance of their work in the culture at large was also profound. We'd like to remind readers of two important interventions by Benedict.

The first, which we wrote about in this space at the time, was his speech at the University of Regensburg in 2006. Refreshingly forthright on the subject of the differences between Christianity and Islam, the former, he pointed out, had a dual allegiance, to both faith and reason. The latter was guided by faith alone. The result is that Christianity can acknowledge the fundamental legitimacy of individual liberty and the secular realm, rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, in a way that is utterly foreign to Islam, for which Allah is all.

What really put the wind up was Benedict's temerity in quoting from a medieval conversation between Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus (a Christian) and an educated Persian at a moment when Constantinople was being besieged by the Ottomans. The Pope quoted this sentence from Manuel: "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."

Result? Muslims reacted according to form. So upset were they at the suggestion that they habitually resorted to violence that thousands took violently to the streets throughout Europe. The Pope was burnt in effigy, at least six churches in the Middle East were trashed, and Leonella Sgorbati, an Italian nun, and her bodyguard were shot and killed at a hospital in Mogadishu.

The mild Benedict was not being deliberately provocative. He was merely speaking the truth. At a moment when Western politicians find it very difficult to speak the truth about Islam, we must all be grateful to Benedict for his courage.

We must be similarly grateful for Benedict's famous 2005 speech about education and "the dictatorship of relativism." The speech had a moral component, of course, but it also had an epistemological one, for what relativism obscures above all is "the light of truth." "Today," Benedict wrote, "a particularly insidious obstacle to the task of educating is the massive presence in our society and culture of that relativism which, recognizing nothing as definitive, leaves as the ultimate criterion only the self with its desires. And under the semblance of freedom it becomes a prison for each one, for it separates people from one another, locking each person into his or her own 'ego.'" Benedict's restatement of Aristotle's criticism of Protagoras's startling idea that "man is the measure of all things" (for that, when you get down to it, is what relativism is all about) was a tonic blast of seriousness. So many of the institutions entrusted with preserving and transmitting the values of our culture have trimmed their sails, embraced the soma of political correctness, and turned their backs on the animating purpose for which they were created. The Catholic Church has not been immune from these temptations, but Pope Benedict XVI bravely and articulately stood athwart those currents and bade us think again. For that, we all—non-Catholics as well as Catholics—owe him thanks.

The bitter fool
by David Yezzi

Dost thou know the difference, my boy, between a bitter fool and a sweet fool?
—Fool, *King Lear*

It takes all sorts of in- and outdoor schooling
To get adapted to my kind of fooling.
—Robert Frost

Poetry has become so docile, so domesticated, it's like a spayed housecat lolling in a warm patch of sun. Most poets choose to play it safe, combining a few approved modes in a variety of unexceptional ways: lyrical, pastoral, whimsical, surrealist, lyrical-pastoral, pastoral-surrealist, interior-lyrical, whimsical-lyrical-interior-surrealist, and so on. These poems feel at home in coffee shops and on college campuses; they circulate breezily among crowds of like-minded poems and all of them work hard to be liked. (They are also beloved of prize committees and radio hosts.) Not since the Edwardians has a period style felt so pinched, though, ironically, today's poetry is offered as "new"—either ground-breakingly populist or transgressively avant-garde. As Joshua Mehigan puts it in a recent issue of *Poetry*:

> In the end, poetry looks radical only to the outside world, which ignores it, while from inside it looks static. Poets got out of these situations before by doing something new, but novelty is superfluous now. There is no way to get into the game without upping the ante, and there is no way out without bluffing or folding or everyone agreeing on a new game.

Mehigan is certainly right about the mug's game of contemporary poetry, but why must everyone *agree* to change the game? And why must the game be *new*? Perhaps the way forward is, in fact, a way back. Perhaps the route into the wilderness will be charted by someone outside the game, who manages to reinvigorate, as Eliot did, a few little-known or neglected strains in poetry—what Hardy liked to call the old way of being new.

Some types of poetry—such as devotional poetry or satire—may still be admired, but they are almost never practiced; no one would dare. When they are attempted, they are made palatable, their rough edges softened. (Most recent satire is just a winking sort of light verse.) Poetry at one time could be truly shocking, and some of it remains shocking today. Take this passage from Juvenal's Ninth Satire, written partly in the voice of a rent-boy: "My Clotho and Lachesis are pleased if my cock can feed my belly. . . . [W]hen will I ever [find a patron] that will save my old age from the beggar's mat and stick? All I want is an income of twenty thousand from secure investments, some silver cups," and a couple of bodyguards, etc. His services, for which he says he was underpaid, included anal intercourse with his former patron and sex with his patron's wife, with whom he fathered two children. Juvenal's withering send-ups of promiscuity, gluttony, and avarice leave no one untouched, not even the virtuous. As Roger Kimball points out, reading Juvenal today may have unexpected and salubrious effects on those who see themselves as

above the fray: "We are unburdened by many benighted prejudices that crimped the souls of our ancestors," writes Kimball. "And how much better we think of ourselves on account of our liberations. If nothing else, Juvenal may help temper that self-satisfaction."

The range of expression in contemporary poetry has been narrowing for years. In the 1980s, a spate of gushy love poetry inspired the poet X. J. Kennedy to compile his fine anthology *Tygers of Wrath*, which gathers "a various sampling of the poetry of hate, paying secondary notice to anger." In his introduction, Kennedy bemoans how, by the lights of recent poems, "Human kind appears . . . as an ethereal spirit, diverted only by rainbows and primroses, smiling in beatific glee when splashed by a passing omnibus." Such poems rarely hint at the fact that, as the critic John Press puts it, "man eats, drinks, commits fornication, dances, plays games, makes jokes, gossips, and runs away in the hour of battle." The spectrum of subjects for poetry should be as broad as the spectrum of human emotions, which is not to say that all emotions are equally admirable, only that we exclude consideration of them at our peril.

How did the main effects of poetry ever boil down to these: the genial revelation, the sweetly poignant middle-aged lament, the winsome ode to the suburban soul? The problem is that such poems lie: no one in the suburbs is that bland; no reasonable person reaches middle age with so little outrage at life's absurdities. What an excruciating world contemporary poetry describes: one in which everyone is either ironic, on the one hand, or enlightened and kind on the other—not to mention selfless, wise, and caring. Even tragic or horrible events provoke only pre-approved feelings.

Poetry of this ilk has a sentimental, idealizing bent; it's high-minded and "evolved." Like all utopias, the world it presents exists nowhere. Some might argue that poetry should elevate, showing people at their best, each of us aspiring to forgive foibles with patience and understanding. But that kind of poetry amounts to little more than a fairy tale, a condescending sop to our own vanity.

Perhaps I suffer from a chemical imbalance or a fatal flaw in sensibility, but I find all this good will in poetry positively hard going. Here is a random example, innocuously titled "The Summer Day," by Mary Oliver, one of America's best-selling and popular poets:

> Who made the world?
> Who made the swan, and the black bear?
> Who made the grasshopper?
> This grasshopper, I mean—
> the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
> the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
> who is moving her jaws back and forth instead
> of up and down—
> who is gazing around with her enormous and
> complicated eyes.

After this anaphoric litany of wistful Whitman, Oliver slyly likens her observation of the grasshopper to a kind of secular prayer. An afternoon of strolling though fields leads her to wonder: "Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?/ Tell me, what is it you plan to do/ with your one wild and precious life?" One of the things I plan to do is pass up, inasmuch as possible, reading more poems like this one. Another poem, "Out of the Stump Rot, Something," lets us know when it is attempting something darker ("If you like prettiness,/ don't come here"), but Oliver always leaves on a night light. The title alludes to Frost's "For Once, Then, Something," with its unsettling vision in the depths of a well. Frost was a poet well acquainted with the night, in poems such as "The Door in the Dark," "The Lockless Door," and numerous others. When Frost watches snow falling he makes us think of death. For Oliver, "There is something about the snow-laden sky/ in winter/ in the late afternoon// that brings to the heart elation." Or, as she writes elsewhere, "My work is loving the world." Nice work if you can get it, though it's enough to make you hate the world, or at least the poetry world.

Oliver enjoys one of the largest audiences for poetry since . . . well, since Frost. She can't be faulted for continuing to give readers what they clearly want. The same call for warmth and "humanity" seems to drive much of the

selection behind Garrison Keillor's "Writer's Almanac," as well as the former U.S. poet laureate Ted Kooser's "American Life in Poetry" column—both hugely popular and far-reaching.

Kooser's poem, "Screech Owl," featured on his website, goes like this:

> All night each reedy whinny
> from a bird no bigger than a heart
> flies out of a tall black pine
> and, in a breath, is taken away
> by the stars. Yet, with small hope
> from the center of darkness,
> it calls out again and again.

This is the kind of experience only poets have, packaged and consumed by poets and by those with poetic souls. No bigger than a heart? Taken away by the stars? Hardy's thrush would have been embarrassed to hang out with this owl. As William Logan has written: "Kooser wants a poetry anyone can read without shame and understand without labor." The result is a kind of easy listening, what a musically minded colleague calls Adult Contemporary, after the popular strain of innocuous soft rock. Adult Contemporary, according to Wikipedia, "is inoffensive and pleasurable enough to work well as background music." It is poetry to accompany your day not disrupt it, to keep one entertained on that long car ride through life. A poem should give pleasure, wrote Wallace Stevens, but when did our pleasures become so wan and modest, and so breezily proffered?

It's partly a matter of realism. By including disturbing emotions, I am not advocating a poetry of decadence (though that too has a soft spot in my heart). Quite the contrary. I would like a poetry that doesn't talk down or talk only to a coterie, one that can call a spade a spade and reveal evil for what is. The condition of satire (broadly construed) is realistic and moral, yet it appealed to poets—such as Catullus, Rochester, Baudelaire, and the writers of French fabliaux—whose visions we do not consider entirely wholesome. As Baudelaire himself wrote, in one of his prefaces to *Les Fleurs du mal*, "Some people have told me that these poems could have evil effects. That did not delight me. Other, kind souls, said that they could do some good, and that did not distress me. The fears of the first and the hopes of the second surprised me in equal measure, and only seemed to prove to me once again that this century of ours has forgotten all the classical wisdom about literature."

The poet Yvor Winters defended Baudelaire against accusations of decadence by comparing him with Shakespeare. Both he and Shakespeare had the ability to portray the unlovely manifestations of man's animus. The materials "of most of Baudelaire," Winters writes, "are no more evil than the materials of Shakespeare. The topics of both men are bad enough, for both explore human nature rather far; both depict evil and make us know it as evil." As Baudelaire wrote in another version of his preface: "It is harder to love God than to believe in him. On the contrary, it is harder for people in this century to believe in Satan than to love him. Everyone is at his beck and call but nobody believes in him. The sublime subtlety of Satan."

Should a poet resist such impulses toward the expression of one's most febrile passions? John Ruskin thought not:

> A poet is great, first in proportion to the strength of his passion, and then, that strength being granted, in proportion to his government of it; there being, however, always a point beyond which it would be inhuman and monstrous if he pushed this government, and, therefore, a point at which all feverish and wild fancy becomes just and true.

The poet's job, according to Winters, is to communicate, as accurately and precisely as possible, the emotions associated with a human experience. Winters gets a bum rap as a chilly rationalist. What he really advocated, it seems to me, was poetry as a catalogue or road map of emotion, each properly motivated by a human experience. Winters himself understood a great range of emotion (as is clear from the harrowing story he wrote about his own nervous breakdown, "The Brink of Darkness"). He exemplifies Eliot's notion that "only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things."

His classicism ("laurel, archaic, rude") struck some as marmoreal or even prudish. But he was a brilliant reader of Baudelaire and Rochester, of Hart Crane and Allen Tate. For all of his talk about the "morality" of poetry, he did not shy away, in his appreciation, from the darkest spectrum of human feeling or even from evil itself.

What poetry today sorely wants, then, is more bile: the realism, humor, and intensity occasioned by the satiric impulse. It's what Shakespeare might have thought of as "the bitter fool." As Bart Van Es explains in his brilliant article in the *Times Literary Supplement* for January 25, Shakespeare's habit of tailoring parts for individual company members greatly shaped his plays. One such example is the succession of the comic actor Will Kemp by Robert Armin. As Van Es writes, "as is well known, [Armin] replaced Kemp as sharer and principle comic actor in Shakespeare's company. Having written a set of broad comic roles for Kemp (Lancelot Gobbo, Bottom, Peter, and Dogberry), the dramatist began from this point on to write plays that featured self-conscious jesters (including Touchstone, Thersites, Feste, and the Fool in *Lear*)." Armin, himself a writer, published a "compilation of prose and poetry called *Fool upon Fool*," and it is impossible to imagine *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, or *King Lear* without the bitter fooling that Armin both wrote about and enacted. If such fooling is comic, it is a comedy tinged with tragedy. (Bile makes its own distinct music. Without it we would lose much of the poetry of Geoffrey Hill—"Tune up an old saw: the name-broker/ is carnifex. Forms of enhanced/ interrogation by the book. Footnotes/ to explain BIRKENAU, BUCHENWALD . . ."—and, of course, Shakespeare: "Cry to it, nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels when she put 'em i' th' paste alive.")

Spleen and the satiric impulse have fueled certain writers to very great heights. Yeats understood their place in the creation of poetry, as did Ibsen. In Edmund Gosse's book on the playwright, we see "Ibsen wandering silently about the streets [of Rome], his hands plunged far into the pockets of his invariable jacket of faded velveteen, Ibsen killing conversation by his sudden moody appearances at the Scandinavian Club, Ibsen shattering the ideals of the painters and enthusiasms of the antiquaries by a running fire of sarcastic paradox." Scraping by on a meager scholarship in 1865, Ibsen found a project that perfectly suited his mood—the verse drama *Brand*, which would, as Gosse writes, "place Ibsen at a bound among the greatest European poets of his age." During the writing, Ibsen kept imprisoned on his writing table a scorpion in an empty beer glass; when the scorpion grew sluggish, the playwright would revive it with a bit of fruit "on which it would cast itself in a rage and eject its poison into it; then it was well again." Disgusted with his Norwegian compatriots for their cautious pacifism in the Danish-German war of 1864, Ibsen through *Brand* sought to purge some of his own pent-up venom.

A number of twentieth-century American poets have embraced a classical tartness and venom: Tom Disch, Turner Cassity, Anthony Hecht, Carolyn Kizer, as well as a handful of poets now writing (including some Brits)—Geoffrey Hill, Frederick Seidel, William Logan, and Sophie Hannah. There are others, of course, but dispiritingly few. And why? A graduate student I spoke with recently offered a plausible theory: collegiality. So many poets rely on poetry for their livelihood nowadays—prizes and fellowships, academic preferment, conferences and readings—that they could never be seen to raise hackles or give offense. The bitter fool is an outsider: the banished Touchstone, the cast-out Fool.

Another reason may have to do with a lack of shared cultural assumptions: as the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Enlarged Edition) has it, "The greatest satire has been written in periods when ethical and rational norms were sufficiently powerful to attract widespread assent, yet not so powerful as to compel absolute conformity—those periods when that satirist could be of his society and apart from it."

Then there is the cultural amnesia that Baudelaire identifies, the loss of the classical tradition. Of course, it never really went away; strong poets have always gravitated toward it.

Here is Robert Lowell in 1961, interviewed for *The Paris Review* by Frederick Seidel:

> LOWELL: [Y]ou take almost any really good Roman poet—Juvenal, or Virgil, or Propertius, Catullus—he's much more raw and direct than anything in English, and yet he has this blocklike formality. The Roman frankness interests me. Until recently our literature hasn't been as raw as the Roman, translations had to have stars. And their history has a terrible human frankness that isn't customary with us—corrosive attacks on the establishment, comments on politics and the decay of morals, all felt terribly strongly, by poets as well as historians. The English writer who reads the classics is working at one thing, and his eye is on something else that can't be done. We will always have the Latin and Greek classics, and they'll never be absorbed. There's something very restful about that.
>
> INTERVIEWER: But, more specifically, how did Latin poetry—your study of it, your translations—affect your measure of English poetry?
>
> LOWELL: My favorite English poetry was the difficult Elizabethan plays and the Metaphysicals, then the nineteenth century, which I was aquiver about and disliked but which was closer to my writing than anything else. The Latin seemed very different from either of these. I immediately saw how Shelley wasn't like Horace and Virgil or Aeschylus—and the Latin was a mature poetry, a realistic poetry.

Also lost is the sense of persona, of a speaker that may or may not share views with the poet but who provokes the reader. Frederick Seidel (who seems to have taken Lowell's comments above to heart) revels in the persona he has created around himself. Like Baudelaire, he "explores human nature rather far," but, like Larkin (in a different vein), that is part of his genius. We recoil from the opening of Seidel's "Broadway Melody":

> A naked woman my age is a total nightmare.
> A woman my age naked is a nightmare.
> It doesn't matter. One doesn't care.
> One doesn't say it out loud because it's rare
> For anyone to be willing to say it.
> Because it's the equivalent of buying billboard space to display it.

Seidel then takes us deeper, to an underlying dread that implicates us and pulls us in despite our resistance, until we have more in common with the speaker than we were willing to admit:

> I hate the old couples on their walkers giving
> Off odors of love, and in City Diner eating a ray
> Of hope, and then paying and trembling back out on Broadway.
>
> Drumming and dancing, chanting something nearly unbearable,
> Spreading their wings in order to be more beautiful and more terrible.

As William Logan has written about Larkin, such poems

> may be the record of how a man converts his basest feelings to something more humane; and we read him, not because he is less base, but because the flaws reveal the pathos. . . . the poems make clear they were not simply a way of concealing from the public taste his gruesome prejudices.

If concealment were Seidel's wish, he'd sound a lot more like the ubiquitous Adult Contemporary poets mentioned above.

Satire needn't be thuddingly didactic. It doesn't need to provoke us into specific action, merely show the difference between virtue and vice. As Auden wrote, "Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice." It would be pretty to think, as so much poetry does, that the world is a place of revelation and light, if only poets show us the way to it. The best poets, however, never forget that the path to light often leads though the dark.

Singing ceremonies
by Robert Conquest

As I write I have before me Clive James's translation of *The Divine Comedy*, just out from Liveright, a division of W. W. Norton, where James and I both have the superb Robert Weil as an editor. It marks a new challenge—and represents years of hard work: first in mastering Italian, then in composing in modified quatrains with masculine rhymes. Now his readers will have even more to enjoy.

James is perhaps better known in Britain than in America—having made his name there first as a leading television celebrity, as well as a journalist, essayist, cultural critic, and poet. His latest book of verse, *Nefertiti in the Flak Tower*, follows earlier collections—most notably *The Book of My Enemy*, *Opal Sunset*, and *Angels over Elsinore*—and reminds us of all for which we are grateful to him.[1] His daring and accomplished poetic persona has ranged so widely—from lyric to satiric, from sentimental to phallic—and taken on so many challenges, that in him we find what amounts to a personal dialect, within which various modes flourish.

I am a generation older than Clive—many of whose friends are children of my lot—and came to know him in the early 1970s. I have long admired his work (and should disclose here that he gave my most recent "serious" book of verse, *Penultimata*, a splendid blurb). As Norman "Moonbase" Mailer I figure, along with Kingsley Amis (Kingsley Kong) and—from the North—Philip Larkin (Philip Lawks), in his 1976 mock epic *Peregrine Prykke's Pilgrimage Through the London Literary World*. Another of his early works was *Unreliable Memoirs*, the brilliant tale of his leaving Australia and coming to England—one of the only books I remember actually buying in a street shop to read awaiting lunch at a Soho restaurant. Over the years that followed, he published a variety of poems of differing length, structure, and intention, but almost all with formal metrical structure and rhyme schemes.

For James, Australia is "the land that continues to inspire it all, even when I have been long away." In earlier collections he recalls his youthful experiences in Sydney with nostalgia, in poems such as "When We Were Kids" ("Now we are old and the memories returning/ Are like the last stars that fade before the morning"). Here, in "Fashion Statement," we find him as a student at Sydney University—"The perfect atmosphere for epigrams/ To flaunt their filigree like toast-rack trams"—where he and his rackety high-brain booze-happy pals spend their time "Searching for words, and we who wrote them down/ Might not have looked it, but we owned the town."

> For nothing rules like easy eloquence
> Tied to the facts yet taking off at will
> Into the heady realms of common sense
> Condensed and energised by verbal skill:
> It has no need to check before a glass
> The swerve of a frock coat around its arse.
>
> Already ugly and with worse to come

1 *Nefertiti in the Flak Tower*, by Clive James; Picador, 96 pages, $24.95.

Yet lovely in its setting past belief,
The city got into our speech. Though some
Were burdened by their gift and came to grief,
And some found fortune but as restless men,
We were dandies. We just didn't see it then.

James is anti-Eliot and anti-Pound ("One had the gab, the other had the gift/ And each looked to the other for a lift"), but among poets of previous generations he admires W. B. Yeats, Louis MacNeice, W. H. Auden (with some reservations), and Philip Larkin ("Not exactly a torrent of creativity: just the best"). In "A Valediction for Philip Larkin," from *The Book of My Enemy*, James's thirty-three stanzas move from the vividly presented zoological wilds of Kenya—where he first learns of Larkin's death—through various air connections back to England, as he muses, half-dreaming, on Larkin's "technique which makes majestic the morose":

The truth is that you revelled in your craft.
Profound glee charged your sentences with wit.
You beat them into stanza form and laughed:
They didn't sound like poetry one bit,
Except for being absolutely it.

Even in prose, as the novelist Anthony Burgess has written, "Art begins with craft, and there is no art until craft has been mastered." So it is a rare pleasure to read James, who has mastered not just the art, but the craft of poetry as well, becoming in the process one of the best poets writing in English. His poetry has never become any of the fashionable forms of word disarrangement that have claimed the title on the sole and insufficient ground that at least they are not prose. In "A Perfect Market," James gives us a short and memorable guide on how to make a poem. He is clear not only on how to be a poet ("making the thing musical is part/ Of pinning down what you are on about"), but also on how to fail to understand the problem. Rejecting the modern argument that the "flight from rhyme/ And reason is a technically precise/ Response to the confusion of a time/ When nothing, said once, merits hearing twice," James instead argues

The voice leads to the craft, the craft to art:
All this is patent to the gifted few
Who know, before they can, what they must do
To make the mind a spokesman for the heart.

Without this, "those who cannot write increase the store/ Of verses fit for those who cannot read." James repeats Ronsard's advice—*ou plutost les chanter* ("Recite your lines aloud. . . . Or even better, sing them")—saying we are drawn to the *sound* of good poetry:

Ronsard was right to emphasise it so,
Even in his day. Now, it's everything:

The language falls apart before our eyes,
But what it once was echoes in our ears
As poetry, whose gathered force defies
Even the drift of our declining years.
A single lilting line, a single turn
Of phrase: these always proved, at last we learn,
Life cries for joy though it must end in tears.

One of James's characteristics is that his pieces are more often than not written round a context with a visual mental imagery quite different in tone or thought from the text that precedes it. Here it will help us to look at his often personal, unequivocal way of handling the varying and often astonishingly highly novel methods of vividly transforming his subjects into vintage verse. He keeps the balance just right in "Signing Ceremony," set in the Hotel Timeo, Taormina, with sweeping views of the bay "stretching east/ Almost to Italy" and Mt. Etna, "Visibly seething in the politest way."

Here he begins with "shallow vodka cocktails . . . spreading numb delight as they go down/ Their syrup mirrors the way lava flows." James's phrasing is individual and unmistakable—to the point sometimes of caricature, though never of contrivance. When he continues "Tonight might be our last, but this, at least,/ Is one romantic setting, am I right?," he is writing lines that could never be taken for anything but Jamesian. Yet in a swift change of tone, he sees in the continuing cycle of Etna's eruptions a various unity forming one long human drama. He has what is commonly lacking in modern poets, a properly rooted tragic sense, and moves swiftly to higher grade reflection on the transitory nature of life and the role love plays:

Only because it's violent to the core
The world grows gardens. Out of earth we came,
To earth we shall return. But first, one more
Of these, delicious echoes of the flame

That drives the long life all should have, yet few
Are granted as we were. It wasn't fair?
Of course it wasn't. But which of us knew,
To start with, that the other would be there,

One step away, for all the time it took
To come this far and see a mountain cry
Hot tears, as if our names, signed in the book
Of marriage, were still burning in the sky?

James's writing on women and men's love has both charm and amiability, praise and surprise. And all the senses, from taste to touch, all the feelings from the heart and tongue and eye and throat. Women in earlier poems are seen over a range of examples from Don Juan in "Sack Artist" ("Reeling between the redhead and the blonde/ Don Juan caught the eye of the brunette./ He had no special mission like James Bond") to Ulysses in "The Nymph Calypso" (". . . just this once he almost hadn't lied"). In this volume, James returns to that theme in "And Then They Dream of Love":

"Were you not more than just a pretty face
And perfect figure," he thought, kissing one
While clamped against the other, "this embrace
Would not be so intense."

But follows with reflections on passion in "The Buzz":

Grown old, you long still for what young love does.
It gives the world a liquid light injection,
A sun bath even in the night.

The old comfort themselves by calling young love blind,

But there is nothing young love fails to see
Except the future. Bodies and their connection
Are all creation, shorn of history.
These are the only humans who exist.
Whoever thought to kiss or to be kissed
Or hit the sack from every known direction
Except them? Visions radiantly true
Don't change with age. Those that have had them do.

More compelling is "Monja Blanca," seven eight-line rhymes on the beautiful White Nun flower, "rarest and loveliest/ Of all her kind," in which the poet sees the desire to possess as futile:

Because we have a mind to make her ours,
And she belongs to nobody's idea
Of the sublime but hers. But that we know,
Or would, if it were not among her powers
Always across the miles to bring us near
To where she thrives on shadows. By her glow
We measure darkness; by her splendour, all
That is to come, or gone beyond recall.

The best of these pages are long and in depth, as in "The Later Yeats":

Where he sought symbols, we, for him, must seek
A metaphor, lest mere praise should fall short
Of how the poems of his last years set
Our standards for the speech that brings the real
To integrated order dearly bought,
Catching the way complexity would speak
If it had one voice. This, he makes us feel,
Is where all deeper meanings are well met,
Contained in a majestic vessel made
Out of the sea it sails on, yet so strong
We never, watching it our whole lives long,
Doubt its solidity. All else may fade,
But this stands out as if it had been sent
To prove it can have no equivalent.

Yeats's early poems are "wind-driven boats"—coracles, dhows—"A little navy floats / In his early pages." Then, "when more substantial things asked to be said," they become sloops, schooners ("These would have been enough to make him great"), until "at the heart/ Of this flotilla" the later work appears as "A huge three-decker fighting ship of state." James remarks on the musicality of Yeats's verse: "We're held in thrall/ By music. Music lush, music austere,/ All music ever heart-felt, holds the flow/ Of splendour in one place." He deftly

weaves echoes of Yeats's poems throughout, and in the final stanzas, sees the ship as "just a metaphor"

> For the battle to make sense of growing old,
> And bless the ebb tide. It is outward bound,
> Fit for the launch of what we have to give
> The future, though that be a paltry thing. . . .
> And for a paragon we have the vast
> Swan-song of Yeats that brought his depths
> to light.
> Among school children or on All Soul's Night,
> Humble or proud, he saved the best for last
> And gave it to the waves—but no. There is
> No ship. Just the words, and all of them are his.

James's themes, particularly in his own later poems, are from the whole human sphere: aging, sex, dying, pity, nostalgia, melancholy: the *lacrimae rerum*, and some of the *cachinnationes rerum* too, played out on a grand stage—as in "Vertical Envelopment," written in free verse—a form perfectly suited to the poet's drug-fuelled delusions:

> Taking the piss out of my catheter,
> The near-full plastic bag bulks on my calf
> As I push my I.V. tower through Addenbrooke's
> Like an Airborne soldier heading for D-day
> Down the longest corridor in England.
> Each man his own mule. Look at all this stuff.
> Pipes, tubes, air bottles. Some of us have
> wheels.
> Humping our gear, we're bare-arsed warriors
> Dressed to strike fear into the enemy,
> But someone fires a flare. Mission aborted.

The sinisterness, very faintly comic, is exactly suited to the theme. For even here, there is no feeling that any of the words have been selected for their novelty, or chicness, or violence, or egotism. There is an uncertain calm:

> On the airfield, the chattering Dakotas
> Have fallen silent. Jump postponed again.
> Stay as you are. Keep your equipment on.

Among visions of "the young/ Soldiers of long ago, in the first years/ Of my full span, who went down through the dark/ With no lives to look back on," figures of friends who've died make an appearance "My outfit one by one in the green light,/ Out of the door and down into the dark":

> The Hitch is with them and I hear him speak
> Exactly as he looked the day we met:
> The automatic flak came bubbling up
> Like champers, dear boy. Overrated stuff.

Recognition of the delusion does not imply tidying up the terrors of it, and when he catalogues the frontal properties of the Jamesian daytime, these too are personal and sinister:

> Where are the women? Nurse, my bag is broken.
> Sorry, it's everywhere. She mops, I cough,
> She brings the nebulizer and I sit
> Exhaling fog. Dakotas starting up
> Make whirlpools in the ground mist. Too
> much luck,
> Just to have lived so long when I unfold
> And shuffle forward to go out and down
> The steep, dark, helter-skelter laundry chute
> Into that swamp of blinking crocodiles
> Men call Shit Creek. Come, let us kiss and part.

No book by even the best of English poets is faultless, but James's flaws are meager and peripheral. Occasional mannerisms annoy—throw-away lines justified only by rhyme. In general his verse has a naturalness and rightness of tone, happily comprehending (as no unity prescribed by critical preconception can) lyric and rhetoric, statement and metaphor, concretion and abstraction. Talk about "great" and "major" poets is a vulgar distraction. These are perhaps suitable words of half a dozen poets, or fewer. None are alive today, and nothing could be more footling (as Byron pointed out in his own time) than the cries of some weekly critics, like teenagers mobbing a pop singer, "He's the greatest!" But James would certainly be well up among the front-runners if poetry was, as some base fellows seem to think, a sort of competition. Even for those of us who have for years felt his work to be very fine and moving, this latest volume adds further to his stature. One's advice is to read these poems first—the serpent beguiled me—then up into the whole oeuvre.

The lips, the teeth, the tip of the tongue

by Denis Donoghue

I have not had the pleasure of hearing M. H. Abrams in person deliver his lecture "The Fourth Dimension of a Poem," but, next best thing, I have seen a video of it online at fourthdimensionofapoem.com.[1] This has helped me to understand his emphasis on the phonology of reading poetry, the physiology of the production of sound. He begins by quoting the first paragraph of *Lolita* to show the sort of thing he means:

> Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth, Lo. Lee. Ta.

He goes on to describe the four dimensions of a poem:

> One dimension is its visible aspect, which signals that you are to read the printed text as a poem, not as prose, and also offers visual clues as to the pace, pauses, stops, and intonation of your reading. A second dimension is the sounds of the words when they are read aloud; or if they are read silently, the sounds as they are imagined by the reader. A third, and by far the most important dimension, is the meaning of the words that you read or hear. The fourth dimension—one that is almost totally neglected in discussions of poetry—is the activity of enunciating the great variety of speech sounds that constitute the words of a poem.

I'm not sure that the sequence is mandatory. I seem to read a poem according to Abrams's number one, followed by his three, then his two, with four coming in last if at all. I pay attention to four only when a line of poetry tells me that something grand is happening in the syllables: "On the bald street breaks the blank day." I advert to rhymes, metaphors and other figures, alliterations, and assonances, but I let lips, tongue, throat, palate, teeth, glottis, and trachea take care of themselves. I am evidently guilty of the neglect that Abrams deplores.

"The Fourth Dimension of a Poem" (2010) and "Keats's Poems: The Material Dimensions" (1998) are the essays in which Abrams emphasizes the phonological events of poetry. In this collection, there are also two essays from 1975 and 1995 in defense of "a humanistic criticism," as opposed to the ideologies of Structuralism and Deconstruction. Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Barbara Johnson are the most prominent critics censured. These essays seem belated, though highly intelligent and often convincing: a lot has changed since 1975. The remaining essays on aspects of Romantic poetry and criticism are splendid, as we would expect, but they do not bring news to anyone who has read Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1973), and *Doing Things with Texts* (1989).

In the title essay, Abrams reads six poems that, he judges, especially satisfy the phonolog-

1 *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem and Other Essays*, by M. H. Abrams; W. W. Norton, 256 pages, $25.95.

ical emphasis: these are Auden's "On This Island," Emily Dickinson's "A Bird Came Down the Walk," Wordsworth's "Surprised by Joy," Tennyson's "Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal," Dowson's "Cynara," and Ammons's "Mansion." But Abrams's commentaries—interpretation and paraphrase, mostly—are what any good humanist reader would say, and they only rarely find a noteworthy phonological character in the words; none at all in Ammons's poem. On Dickinson's poem Abrams notes:

> In the last two lines of the fourth stanza . . . eight of the ten words have prominent components—denoted by the letters *h*, *th*, *w*, and *f*—in which the sound is produced by applying a soft pressure that forces the air through constricted oral passages—
>
> And *h*e unrolled *h*is *f*eat*h*ers
> And ro*w*ed *h*im so*f*ter *h*ome
>
> These oral actions accord with, and so enhance, the actions they describe; and that is, the soft pressure on the air by the robin's wings as he unrolls his feathers and flies—or rows, or swims—away.

Abrams's interpretation of "Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal" regards the line "Now lies the Earth all Danaë to the stars" as "in a discreetly indirect way, the most explosively concentrated erotic image in all poetry." But the line that gratifies his phonological zeal is the first of the last stanza:

> Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,
> And slips into the bosom of the lake.
> So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip
> Into my bosom and be lost in me.

Abrams comments:

> The normal word order would be "Now the lily folds up all her sweetness." By inverting the subject and predicate and postponing the preposition "up" until the end, Tennyson suspends the syntactical closure so as to replicate the suspense of the waiting lover: "Now folds the lily all her sweetness up." By delaying the closure, Tennyson also heightens our awareness of what it feels like to terminate the clause by enunciating the plosive *p* in the word "up"; and that in turn makes us aware of the repetition of that speech-sound in the following verb "slips," and then of the repetition of that word, in the final request to his loved one: "slip/ Into my bosom . . ."

Abrams's verb "replicate" and similar verbs elsewhere in his commentaries indicate that he listens for words that are echoes to the sense. "Keats's iconicity," he maintains, "is sometimes such a seeming mimicry of sound by sound: 'The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves' ('Ode to a Nightingale')." On a line from Keats's "Ode to Autumn"—"Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind"—Abrams speaks of

> the pressure and sensation of the inner air-stream, the breath, that is sensed first in the throat in the aspirated (i.e., air-produced) *h* in "hair," then between the tongue and hard palate in the aspirated *s*, and on to the upper teeth and lower lip in the aspirated *f*'s of "soft-lifted," to become most tangible when the air is expelled through the tensed lips to form the *w* that occurs no fewer than three times—each time initiating the puff of air that forms the syllable *win* in the two words that denote the outer airstream, "winnowing wind."

I fear I would do my poor mouth an injury if I tried to follow Abrams in these oral dramas. Meredith's "The Lark Ascending" is rich in *r*'s, but I would be hard put to say in what the richness further consists. The poems most attractive to the phonologist, I think, are poems of incantation, issuing from what T. S. Eliot called, in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism,* the auditory imagination, "the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end." I expected from Abrams a comment or two on onomatopoeia, where language imitates the sound of the thing denoted, as in King Lear's "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!/ You cataracts and hurricanoes,

spout/ Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!"

It is not surprising that Abrams finds his most answerable instances of the fourth dimension in Keats's poems. In Keats's "Ode on Melancholy," the poet describes one "whose strenuous tongue/ Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine." Examining this, Abrams notes that "the plosive onset and muscular thrust of the tongue in uttering the heavily stressed 'burst' duplicates the action of the tongue in crushing a grape, while, in enunciating the phrase 'his palate fine,' the touch of the blade of the tongue, in forming the consonants *l* and *n*, is felt on the palate that the words designate."

After reading Abrams's book, I recognize that, old dog as I am, I'll have to learn another trick.

Glyn Maxwell doesn't go in for phonology, so far as I can tell, except for a moment in his remark on Edward Thomas's "Old Man" when he asks readers how one should speak the line "At least, what that is clings not to the names":

> How does one say that line? "At least—what *that—is*—clings—not to the *names*?" Perhaps. The lips, the tongue, the throat, the *brows*, all are working, willing to know, falling short of it.

Excused by "perhaps" and the italics, I'd ask: "falling short of *what?*"

Maxwell has many capacities. Dauntingly prolific at a mere fifty, he has written several volumes of poetry, slim and not so slim, libretti, plays in verse, a book-length tale in *terza rima* called *Time's Fool*, and a novel, *The Girl Who Was Going to Die*, written throughout in demotic English, which I cannot undertake to read again. His best books of poetry, in my view, are *The Nerve* (2002) and *Hide Now* (2008), and in them my choice poems are "All Things Bright," "Country Birthday," "Lit Windows," "The Alumni," "The Leonids," "The Surnames," and "Playground Song." The last two stanzas of "Playground Song" will give some idea, though not enough, of Maxwell's poems and their qualities:

> And tiny things too late to do
> have gone so far they can't be seen
> except at dusk by me and you,
> and though I hide till Halloween
>
> you never come, not even now
> each hand has reached the other sleeve,
> not even now the light is low
> and green as you would not believe.

And now we have *On Poetry*.[2] Maxwell says it is "a book for anyone," but it is not for scholars, apparently. There are no page-references, no footnotes, no bibliography, no index. If readers want to follow up a hint, they will have to find the information for themselves. It is not clear whom Maxwell is addressing. The book sounds as if it were a tape-recorded set of talks delivered to a group of people with an amateur interest in poetry but no inclination to study poems. They might be out for an evening's pleasure to hear a lively, charming Englishman—now resident in the U.S.—read his favorite poems and make some cordial remarks. If he happens to refer to something aside from the official track—Osip Mandelstam's "Conversation about Dante," for instance—they may hold the reference in mind, make a note of it, or let it pass in the geniality of the evening. Maxwell might well have called the sessions "Poems I Love." The only advice he gives to aspiring poets is to be careful to get the line-endings right.

His own poems are formal, but he refuses to be called a formalist. His motto is: "New forms. But still, forms." In a variant: "New forms yes. But forms, and reasons for them." He has no time for Free Verse. His poems are conversation pieces, conducted in the middle range of social experience. He deplores talk of Obscurity and Alienation:

> Is the young poet *still* to feel hurtled into a jagged new zone of speed and fuel and skyscrapers and faceless strangers? Is it still the future? Are we still so *alienated?* Six degrees

2 *On Poetry*, by Glyn Maxwell; Oberon Books, 160 pages, $23.95.

> of separation? We're one click from *everyone*.
> Beg, steal or borrow some cash and you could
> picnic on Uluru by the end of tomorrow. Rich
> folks have formed a queue for outer space. The
> Twin Towers go down and I get emailed poems
> about it *that afternoon*.

In "The Only Work"—from *The Wedge*—Maxwell has his own version of humanism:

> When a verse
> has done its work, it tells us there'll be one day
> nothing but the verse,
>
> and it tells us this the way a mother might
> inform her son so gently of a matter
> he goes his way delighted.

In this spirit, Maxwell thinks that reading a poem should be like going to meet someone. "What *is* the poem if it doesn't sound, act, think, breathe, like a human?," he asks. "The form and tone and pitch of any poem should coherently express the presence of a human creature." Talk about the death of the author, or the merely-linguistic figure of the self—the talk that troubles Abrams—has left Maxwell calm: a walk down to the local pub seems to put that ideology in its place.

Nor does he go in for severe comparisons. Speaking of "two great Irishmen," he says that Van Morrison's "Brown-Eyed Girl" "is *essentially* the same sweet mystery as this poem"—Yeats's "The Song of Wandering Aengus." *Essentially*? The same? But generally Maxwell's taste is fine, especially as he admires Edward Thomas's poems as they deserve. The poems he chooses to read include these: Hart Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge," Ivor Gurney's "To His Love," Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain," a bit from "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Louis MacNeice's "Snow," Wilfred Owen's "*Dulce et Decorum Est*," stanzas of Hopkins's "The Wreck of the Deutschland" and the whole of "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," Arnold's "Dover Beach," Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," Isaac Rosenberg's "Break of Day in the Trenches," and stanzas from Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

The only pages of *On Poetry* I could happily do without are those in which Maxwell gives an account of a poetry workshop—or several such—he has taught. He doesn't appear to be appalled by the evidence he brings forward, but if his account is accurate and, worse still, representative of such classes, I implore our academic masters to put a stop to them: They are occasions of vanity, expense of spirit—not to speak of wastes of time, energy, and money. I thank God that I have never had to teach four such boring, tedious students as his imaginary "Bella," "Ollie," "Mimi," and "Wayne." Here is "Mimi," in part:

> Mimi is probably a poet. She may not really be
> bothered, but having written
> said the idiot at the start
> and sat back, doodling in her book while re-
> charging her Kindle, yawning and stretching in
> such a way as to make a cat seem diligent, she
> then suddenly shot forward like it mattered and
> changed it to
> *went* the idiot at the start
> because the line wasn't good enough, and she
> really couldn't bear it.

Maxwell says "like it mattered" when I would say "as if it mattered." He doesn't ensure grammatical niceties. "In my play *After Troy,* the desolate Hecuba confronts the tribal chief Mestor whom she thought was her friend, but whom she now knows has murdered her youngest son."

Still, by far the best chapter in *On Poetry* is Maxwell's lecture on his experiences in the theater, writing verse plays, trying to answer the hard question: In the theater, why verse rather than prose? He starts gently: "verse is, in comparison with prose, a measurable and governable way of creating distinctions in voice." Then he quotes a passage from Eliot's "Sweeney Agonistes" and ends with a big piece of dialogue—hardly a conversation—from his own *After Troy.* The eloquence of the lecture is fully justified.

Henry James by the Pacific

by William Logan

The American Scene, that itinerary of his brilliantly melancholy return to America, took Henry James through New York and New England, down into the cities of the Eastern Seaboard, and as far as Palm Beach. He left the journey where in a sense it left him:

> There was no doubt, under the influence of this last look, that Florida still had, in her ingenuous, not at all insidious way, the secret of pleasing, and that even round about me the vagueness was still an appeal. The vagueness was warm, the vagueness was bright, the vagueness was sweet, being scented and flowered and fruited; above all, the vagueness was somehow consciously and confessedly weak. I made out in it something of the look of the charming shy face that desires to communicate and that yet has just too little expression.

In his fiction, James was the master of such characterization, captured almost in the act of becoming present and vivid to his own imagination, "vague" because the impressions from which character might be "built up" had not coalesced, or solidified, or congealed. (That the character is here the state of Florida suggests how far toward fiction James's journey had taken him.) The passage is a reminder that James's style itself depends on a beguiling, willful vagueness, one extraordinary in how much it reveals while seeming to wind candy floss around a paper core.

There, a sentence or two later, *The American Scene* ended, at least in its American edition, published in 1907. The British edition pressed on for a few pages, where James ruminated, thoughtfully, lugubriously, over what he had discovered. He had seen an immense swath of country, or as much as the Pullman cars could show him through the "great square of plate-glass." However much the train's "great monotonous rumble" seemed to boast, "See what I'm making of all this—see what I'm making, what I'm making!" James could answer only, "I see what you are *not* making, oh, what you are ever so vividly not." The America he saw was a solitude ravaged:

> You touch the great lonely land—as one feels it still to be—only to plant upon it some ugliness about which, never dreaming of the grace of apology or contrition, you then proceed to brag with a cynicism all your own.

Tocqueville was no more eloquent in his admiration or despair.

James's journey did not end with the book—after his return north, he pressed westward, to Chicago, to Los Angeles and San Francisco and Seattle, then back east through St. Paul. *The American Scene* was meant merely as an introduction. Though it had been his intention to offer a sequel on his western visit, seeing the vast continent he had previously only imagined, events overtook him. The San Francisco earthquake in April 1906, less than a year after James sailed back to England, disturbed him so much that he ended his American reveries. As his nephew Harry later recalled, "He felt it as an event so stupendous and sensational

that it must throw what he had to say into the shade."

It was perhaps this sense of incompletion, this invocation of the artistic idea conceived, toyed with, and reluctantly abandoned, that drew Donald Justice to that western journey. James's impressions survive only in stray letters and a few pages in a notebook, but from their incomplete matter and their troubled grandeur Justice wrote a sonnet as sad and knowing as any in American literature.

Henry James by the Pacific

In a hotel room by the sea, the Master
Sits brooding on the continent he has crossed.
Not that he foresees immediate disaster,
Only a sort of freshness being lost—
Or should he go on calling it Innocence?
The sad-faced monsters of the plains are gone;
Wall Street controls the wilderness. There's an
immense
Novel in all this waiting to be done,
But not, not—sadly enough—by him. His
talents,
Such as they may be, want an older theme,
One rather more civilized than this, on balance.
For him now always the consoling dream
Is just the mild dear light of Lamb House falling
Beautifully down the pages of his calling.

The sonnet was collected (as "Epilogue: Coronado Beach, California") with three brief preambles under the title "American Scenes (1904–1905)." Here the poet drew from James's journey for portraits, each just two quatrains, of Cambridge houses, a railroad junction south of Richmond, and an old cemetery in Charleston. That is how the poem appears in his *Collected Poems*, though Justice had originally published the sonnet separately and later published it alone once more, under the title above.

The poem begins almost whimsically, with a sidelong allusion to Poe, whose "kingdom by the sea" has been reduced to a modern hotel room, the sort to which James resorted after those deprivations and inconveniences that were a tax on his patience through much of his travels. (He called the hotel a "synonym for civilization.") The pathos-heavy verses of "Annabel Lee," its lovers parted by death, read now like a popular song composed for the fashionable morbidity of the 1840s (the poem was indeed later adapted in that vein). The constriction and the absurdity of the hotel room—its rented comforts, its transient occupation—seem the wrong casement for that Jamesian brooding from which his rare, rarefied art so often hatched. In a hotel, he was no better than any other tourist. (The first provocation in the poem is the title—who would imagine James, that denizen of the parlor, that habitué of New York and London, having anything to do with the Pacific?)

James loved Southern California: "The days have been mostly here of heavenly beauty, and the flowers, the wild flowers just now in particular, . . . fairly *rage*, with radiance." We would think ill of the novelist had he known nothing of nature; we should not think ill because he was no camper, no lover of the discomforts a hotel's comfort might make bearable. Here at the start, Justice has made a small protest against Thoreau, against the Romanticism that would never truck with hotels—the contemplations of art do not require for their setting the "Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and shades of death" of *Paradise Lost*. The sublime may be purchased on hire, in other words, and at a remove.

That lost freshness is the freshness of the whole country, a century or more after the end of the Revolution. The American experiment always seemed tenuous, perhaps more so to those who had long lived abroad. (Who within the country has ever seen it plain?) There were disasters immediately ahead—the San Francisco quake, the Panic of 1907—but none worse than the disasters behind. Still, every freshness is ground down by history; and James's great theme is the loss of innocence, dramatized most brutally where the innocent meets a Europe wiser and more cunning and fatal. (The distinction is not subtle—freshness is lost gradually, minute-by-minute, but innocence is lost once for ever.) The reader cannot ignore that, for the aging novelist now in the shadows of his career, the freshness lost is personal as well. *The Age of Innocence*, by James's friend Edith Wharton, would not be

published until after his death—but it was set in that Gilded Age James knew well.

Sailing to America after an absence of more than twenty years, the novelist sought signs of the life he had abandoned. (He had intended to call his book *The Return of the Native*.) Perhaps the saddest story of his late career is "The Jolly Corner" (1908) in which an expatriate returns to New York after an even longer lingering abroad, returns repeatedly to his large, old-fashioned house, now closed up, where he is haunted by a figure glimpsed briefly, flittingly, at the end of a vista of rooms or in the shadows, a figure with the face of a stranger and a mutilated hand. Only at the end of the story does the exile realize that this compound ghost is the self he would have become, had he remained. The fiction possesses a rueful substrate for an author long dispossessed. James visited the family home in Boston, the house on Ashburton Place where he had lived during the Civil War, and was so moved that weeks later he came once more, only to find the building razed and the ground naked and bare, "as if the bottom had fallen out of one's own biography."

No wonder James often found solace in his rented rooms. He wrote from a club in Chicago, just before the push west,

> I am already . . . rather spent and weary, weary of motion and chatter, and oh, of such an unimagined dreariness of *ugliness* (on many, on *most* sides!) and of the perpetual effort of trying to "do justice" to what one doesn't like. If one could only damn it and have done with it! . . . This Chicago is huge, *infinite* . . . ; black, smoky, *old*-looking. . . . Yet this club (which looks old and sober too!) is an abode of peace, a benediction to me in the looming largeness; I *live* here, and they put one up . . . with one's so excellent room with perfect bathroom and w.c.

If even Paradise benefits from a Paradise to escape to, how much more important that hell should. (The charming rumbling and rambling of James's letters might remind us that his brother, William James, coined the phrase "stream of consciousness.")

It may not be surprising that James felt this loss of freshness just where freshness achieved so much amid so little, in that California spring where a man could dine like an Adam ("I live on oranges and olives," James remarked in delight, "fresh from the tree"). That is the Eden for which this Adam had perhaps unknowingly been searching; and yet it casts further into darkness all that he has seen and disliked in the hideously altered cities along the way. Paradise may be regained, but never innocence.

The second quatrain of the sonnet suggests what might be made of those American losses—the exile is always seeking to turn into gold his portion of straw. In view of that alluring emptiness of the Pacific, James, the poet's James, contemplates the inner vacancy of the country he has just crossed. Arriving in Los Angeles after a tedious journey on the Southern Pacific, the real James reported that he had "reached this racketing spot . . . many hours late, & after an ordeal, of alkali deserts & sleep-defying 'sleepers' drawn out almost to madness." From all that muddled, middling emptiness, something, perhaps.

The "sad-faced monsters" had been slaughtered nearly to extinction by hide- and tongue-hunters (pickled buffalo tongue was once a delicacy). Much of that Jamesian sense of a future foreclosed falls into the simple, discomfiting sentence, "Wall Street controls the wilderness." This was the end Frederick Jackson Turner had foreseen, or worse than the end. The possibility of infinite American expansion, one that contemplated the eventual annexation of Mexico and Canada, with further annexations abroad, was no longer possible. The escape within, the movement ever west, had died with the closing of the frontier. Wall Street owned the wilderness because Congress had deeded it away. To build a railroad across that vast country known as the Great American Desert, transcontinental railroad companies had been given generous land grants along the track—land greater in area than the state of Texas. The very comforts James enjoyed in his posh Pullman car were purchased from those destroying the wilderness.

The great novels of the Master (as his disciples called him, perhaps not always without teasing) were now behind him—*The Wings*

of the Dove (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), *The Golden Bowl* (1904), and more distantly *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). Only recently behind him, the greater of them, but behind him nonetheless. Ahead lay the tedious gathering and finicky rewriting of the New York edition, with its extraordinary introductions; but his triumphs would now be rare, dominated by mishaps and failed projects. Apart from the New York introductions and half-a-dozen mostly mediocre stories, his finished work would be reduced to his refined memoirs of childhood and the end of youth. It was perhaps James's fear of what lay ahead at sixty-one that drew Justice at sixty to contemplate the artistic crisis every artist may eventually face.

There might have been a Jamesian novel of the West, a novel that encapsulated the American character—its industry, its careless ambition and go-ahead nature, its heedless desire for profit. It would have been unlike any novel the Master had written. He had often set the American character in the frame of Europe, where in mutual incomprehension the American sometimes lost more than innocence. ("Innocence," with its brute capital letter, is where the poem leaves the freshness offered by youth—the novelist aging as well as his country—and enters the realm of Adam's innocence and the loss of Paradise.) There seems no evidence in his letters or journals that James ever contemplated such a novel, but Justice uses the idea to broach the real subject, the artist's recognition of his own limits, and of his eventual extinction. Justice, who never wrote a poem of major length, and except once or twice never a love poem, filled his late work with gestures of valediction, often in poems of quiet refusal.

It is a terrible moment, when a man realizes that he no longer possesses a reflexive understanding of his own country. On his belated return to America, James found once familiar cities he hardly recognized (as well as a few, like Philadelphia, that came as a relief). "The Jolly Corner" suggests that to have stayed would have been an invitation to tragedy, but of course James could not know what novels he might have written, what triumphs he might have endured, had he not moved to England.

The terms in which Justice casts that knowledge are those of talent. The word, in its modern sense, derives from the parable in Matthew 25:14–30, where before a long journey a man divides his money among three servants. On his return, when asked how they employed their "talents," the first two servants boast that they had doubled his money by using it for trade. (It would be profitable to know what sharp practice or Yankee cuteness the servants employed.) The talent was no mean amount of money, by rough estimate equivalent to a quarter million dollars, or even perhaps twice that. The last and lowest servant confesses that, fearing his master's wrath, he had buried his single talent. The master retrieves the talent and has him cast out "into outer darkness." The parable, of course, looks toward those gifts granted by God—what we now call talent. If we do not use God's gifts, the burden of the parable implies, we shall be cast out as well.

One of the stray amusements of Justice's sonnet is the poet's care with words—the rhyme between *talents* and *balance* that calls up the moneychanger's balance, the alliteration tying *Wall Street* grotesquely to *wilderness*, the brute conjunction of *Master* and *disaster* (used to very different effect in Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle "One Art"). From the moneychanger's balance we have acquired our sense of an account in balance. When Milton wrote, "To serve therewith my Maker, and present/ My true account" in the sonnet "When I consider how my light is spent," the word refers both to financial accounting and to the account rendered to God at the Day of Judgment—it may also be the tale the poet feels impelled to write. Such small pleasures, such small recognitions of pleasure, are those any good poet scatters by the way. Though they may be bound to meaning, they are not necessary to it; yet they come with such frequency in Justice's poem that a reader may be tempted to look deeper, to find perhaps in those vanished sad-faced monsters a reminder of the vastation James's father faced in midlife, a year after his son's birth—or of those devastations, those terrible epiphanies, James himself forced upon his major characters.

Perhaps, at the outer edge of affection and allusion, "Innocence" possesses hidden ties to

"immense," partly because "Innocence" has been conditioned by the previous "lost," which sits menacingly above it at line end (like the warning Dante saw over the gates of Hell), and "immense" is dramatically enjambed with "Novel"—the play between these collusions is intricate, and not just because James was often drawn in his novels, immensely, to the theme of lost innocence. Though I resist critics who find meaning in the physical—often accidental—placement of words, had I written the poem I would not have been displeased by accident. In his sonnet, Milton too uses the parable of the talents. The line "And that one talent which is death to hide" swings Janus-like between Matthew and our modern usage, which predates Milton by two centuries. Milton's crisis is his blindness—how can he continue to write afterward? If a man fails to use God's gift, will he be cast, in this case, from an inner darkness to an outer one? What lay before the poet was the epic of lost innocence, *Paradise Lost*, the work (really the long novel of a different day) that looms in the background of this closing of the frontier.

The minor pleasures extend to meter—Justice's pentameter is canny enough to absorb the juddering of the third line, where the poet has probably invoked the rare privilege of an initial anapest: "Not that HE foreSEES." (Otherwise the line would be trochaic pentameter—or even hexameter.) The tenth line is similarly difficult, and would require an odd emphasis ("SUCH as THEY MAY be"—trochee-spondee—when the phrasing seems to ask for "SUCH as THEY may BE"). That stress on "may" introduces a fine hesitation to James's thinking that, given his manner, might be perfect here. The anapests scattered through the poem are otherwise naturally inserted, so never assertive; and, because of the sharp caesura, the reader might not notice that the seventh line is probably an alexandrine.

The sonnet is a form with certain debts that must be recognized and paid. Justice was a poet who rarely worked in form without testing it a little—he trusted that a good artist could get away with things a bad one cannot. It is by such pressure on convention, by such slight fractures of the expected, that a reader is made sensitive to the artist's finesse—the finesse evident, for example, in the mimicry of the final line, where the initial trochee allows a fall brought up short, amusingly, by the word "down" (the fall begins with "falling" in the previous line). A reversed first foot is the most common variation in iambic pentameter; but it's unusual to find in meter the echoes of meaning, or at least ones the least interesting.

A man who knew nothing but civilization might have found a novel on the wilderness, or what wilderness yet remained, a bad idea. Twain perhaps reached a similar impasse when he came to write the sequel to *Huckleberry Finn*. On the Mississippi, he was in his medium—the world where he had grown up, the river he had traveled as a cub pilot during the great days of the steamboat. The sequel was titled *Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians*, and after some fifty pages Twain abandoned it. It's one thing to imagine a Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court—such a novel can dine on secondhand medievalism—but the American wilderness was to Twain both too close and too far away. He was out of his element, and he knew it.

The sonnet ends with a dying fall, a couplet using feminine rhymes. *Falling/calling* echoes the feminine rhymes of *Master/disaster* and *talents/balance*—among the most galvanizing rhymes in the poem. The consoling dream for James can no longer be of the elsewhere, of America unseen or America abandoned—both are now lost to him, and he is driven back to his beloved house in Rye, Lamb House, where he had written the three extraordinary novels of the early century. The consoling dream may be a retreat, as the poet must have realized—in its first printing, the line read "recurring," which feels darker, more burdened, a haunting. Justice meant the dream to be comforting, no doubt, for a James so far from home. "Consoling" secures the better reading.

The return to Lamb House feels like a defeat, however, a defeat only partially rescued by that falling light—falling handsomely, but still falling. "Fall" is a charged word after so much talk of innocence. Adam and Eve were ejected from their kingdom—but in a sense James has

withdrawn to his own paradise, there to live out his days like Prospero in retirement. The word that ends the poem, however, is "calling." Milton quarreled with himself about how to use those God-given talents; he found his answer, not in Matthew 25, but in the parable of the vineyard in Matthew 20:1–16, where men hired in the morning complain when those hired later in the day are paid the same amount. "God doth not need/ Either man's work or His own gifts," Milton is informed by Patience, one of the Christian virtues. "They also serve who only stand and wait." (James knew patience as a devil—he remarks in his brief notes on California, "I can only invoke my familiar demon of patience, who always comes, doesn't he?, when I call.") Milton must wait, in other words, for the call. We still use that word, in the sense of artistic calling, though we know it better by its Latin equivalent, vocation.

At the end of the poem, James is called back to his calling, to those words he puts down so masterfully—and the reader should not ignore the quiet, almost religious gesture, neither to be mocked nor really to be believed, of the English light falling onto the page (an illuminated manuscript!) like the light of the Annunciation. In this ending, the artist has been summoned to his gifts once more, called by whatever figure we wish to name (God, the Muse, one's private demon of artistic necessity). It is perhaps a sly touch that those late novels had been composed by what might also be called a calling—beginning in 1897, at least at Lamb House, a secretary typed out James's sentences as he dictated them.

A reader of more religious temperament might discover in the name Lamb House a hint of passivity and sacrifice. Indeed, James could be seen, if not a lamb led to ritual slaughter, then as the passive recipient of those gifts—but the retreat to Rye does suggest that no longer will James take on a major challenge in the novel. (Indeed, he never finished another.) He will merely go over his life in his autobiographies and his art in the New York edition, waiting for the end. The name makes an accidental but severe contrast to those monsters of the plains, shot down in their thousands and tens of thousands for that most American of religions, commerce. Though that calling back was in some ways a failure for James, it was not for Justice, whose late poems were among his most gorgeous and most darkly revealing.

Justice drew heavily from *The American Scene* for the sets of paired quatrains that preceded the sonnet in "American Scenes (1904–1905)." In "Cambridge in Winter," for example:

> **Immense** pale **house**s! **Sunshine** just now
> and **snow**
> **Light up and pauperize** the whole brave
> show—
> Each fanlight, each veranda, each good address,
> **All** a **mere paint and pasteboard paltriness**!
>
> These **winter sunsets are the one fine thing**:
> **Blood on the snow**, some last impassioned
> fling,
> **The wild frankness** and **sadness of**
> **surrender**—
> As if our cities ever could be tender!

The original lines in the notebook read:

> The **snow**, the **sunshine**, **light up and pauperize** all the wooden surfaces, **all** the **mere paint and pasteboard paltriness**. **The one fine thing are** the **winter sunsets**, the **blood on the snow**, the pink crystal of the west, **the wild frankness**, wild **sadness** (?)—so to speak—**of** the **surrender**.

You must cast an eye upward from these lines for the phrases condensed and formed into the initial exclamation: "the **immense** rise in the type and scope and scale of the American **house**, as it more and more multiplies." The poet has adjusted the syntax, tightened the prose here and particularized it there (to striking effect in the third line), and allowed the rhymes suggested in James to drive to the surface some of the themes he chose to leave buried. The scene of the houses is so resplendent that the reader who fails to give due weight to "pauperize" and "paltriness" may not realize how much James detested new American architecture.

Justice had less material for the California scene—or, more likely, he conceived of the sonnet differently, as a portrait of James, not an invocation of the Master's observations of the here or there. The only debt the sonnet owes lies in the penultimate line—James had remarked in his notebook, "These things are all packed away, . . . till I shall let in upon them the mild still light of dear old L[amb] H[ouse]."

The sonnet may have a more obscure source, however—"On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." The poems each concern discovery of a land often rumored but never visited. Lack of ancient Greek kept Keats beyond the borders of Homer's domain, as no doubt sheer discomfort had for James when thinking of California—the transcontinental railroad was not completed until he was in his mid-twenties, and offered only miserable comfort for years thereafter. Balboa (I shall correct Keats's error) reached the shores of the Pacific after a slog through jungle and swamp, a journey of some twenty-five days. James could have traveled from Chicago to Los Angeles—two thousand miles or better—in less than three, though delays made him late. If he was swaddled in the absurd comforts of a Pullman car, he would have been provided with a chef and a stock of good wines (he mentions in a letter from Chicago that he believes the train to have "barber's shops, bathrooms, stenographers and typists"). According to William Robertson in *The History of America* (1777), when Balboa reached the Pacific with his cohort of men, he

> advanced alone to the summit, that he might be the first who should enjoy a spectacle which he had so long desired. As soon as he beheld the South Sea stretching in endless prospect below him, he fell on his knees, and lifting up his hands to heaven, returned thanks to God. . . . His followers, observing his transports of joy, rushed forward to join in his wonder, exultation, and gratitude.

This was the version Keats knew—he too wrote from books. Balboa stood alone, looking out at his discovery, knowing that history had changed. Beyond the horizon lay other lands to conquer and the great trading entrepôts of Asia. He had found the realms of gold.

Keats too was changed. Having been introduced one night to Chapman's translation of Homer, he wrote his sonnet rapidly and fluently the next morning—it was the first poem of genius he produced. Having come the immense distance, James—the James whom Justice partially invents—takes stock of himself, looking back over the country so rapidly compassed. It is a retrospective of a life unlived—he sees the great themes a novelist might gather in force, the life of the country to which he had been born. He knows he must abandon them, as he had abandoned the country itself twenty-odd years before. For James, that country, his own country, must remain unwritten. He would turn homeward, having found at the far reaches of the New World, not possibilities opened, but possibilities finally and forever closed.

Each poet has used a great literary figure as the medium of self-discovery—these are poems in part about the rewards of reading. Keats casts his discovery in terms of conquest. Having written the sonnet, he embarked upon his brief, radiant career. For Justice, his career nearing its end, the question is whether age makes the artist impotent. If the later sonnet is a peculiar inversion of "Chapman's Homer," each is also a performative act whose writing resolves an artistic crisis. Keats felt denied the greatest poet of the Western world by his ignorance of ancient Greek. Chapman's translation opened the borders, and the poet responded by showing what his gifts could accomplish. Justice considered whether the aging artist could continue to write, whether age makes the artist impotent—the beauty of the sonnet proves the anxiety premature. In "When I consider," Milton also found the answer to a question—whether, though blind, he could still employ his magnificent gifts.

I once asked Donald Justice whether he had recognized the odd, subterranean links between "Chapman's Homer" and "Henry James by the Pacific." He seemed surprised, then gratified. After thinking for a moment, he said, "Not at all."

The too-brief career of Countee Cullen

by Michael Anderson

A fast starter and an early finisher: Like many another *Wunderkind*, Countee Cullen demonstrates how short is the shelf-life of precocity. His poetry first won acclaim while he was in high school; his first book was published upon his graduation from college. From the age of seventeen, Cullen was showered with prizes, culminating with a Guggenheim fellowship when he was twenty-five. "From the beginning Cullen was a poet with a public reputation—a kind of prodigy, whose works were noticed and held up for praise," Major Jackson writes in an introduction to the Library of America's handsome edition of Cullen's collected poems.[1]

Remarkably, the recipient of this run of good fortune was black. Cullen's career coincided with the Harlem Renaissance, that eccentric phenomenon of the Roaring Twenties resulting from an odd conjunction of social forces: a fascination with black culture by white bohemians and a calculation by officials at the principal civil rights organizations, the NAACP and the National Urban League, that the display of artistic accomplishment would elevate the standing of the race. These motives were in frequent conflict. White America thrilled to the putative atavism of jazzy "voodoo music" in Harlem cabarets ("You go sort of primitive up there," the entertainer Jimmy Durante commented) and sought spiritual renewal from the psychic shock of World War I in a celebration of the "exotic" ("One likes to cherish illusions about the race soul, the eternal Negroid soul, black and glistening and touched with awfulness and mystery," D. H. Lawrence wrote).

Such images—"an impulsive, irrational, passionate savage, reluctantly wearing a thin coat of culture," as James Weldon Johnson complained—were directly opposite to the demonstration of black mastery of high culture desired by civil rights mandarins. Little wonder they considered Cullen the very embodiment of the Renaissance. His debut collection of poems, *Color* (1925), enjoyed a good sale, and won not only critical applause but also plaudits from established poets: "There is something in your work that makes it entirely your own," Edwin Arlington Robinson wrote in congratulation; "Cullen's certainly a find," Robert Frost commented. "I have been much struck with his work."

Moreover, Cullen's verse was firmly in the romantic lyric tradition. In high school, he had studied Keats for two terms; his senior thesis was an appreciation of Edna St. Vincent Millay; he disparaged Amy Lowell and the free-verse Imagist school. Earning his master's degree at Harvard, he studied English and Scottish popular ballads under George Lyman Kittredge, the English critical essay under Bliss Perry, the English romantic movement under Irving Babbitt, and poetry under Robert S. Hillyer. "As a poet he is a rank conservative, loving the measured line and the skillful rhyme," Cullen wrote in a self-description. As Jackson notes, "He was a formalist's formalist"; even as an under-

1 *Countee Cullen: Collected Poems*, edited by Major Jackson; Library of America, 336 pages, $24.95.

graduate, his technical mastery in the ballad (his preferred form) won Kittredge's praise. He was the first American poet to employ the Chaucerian "rime royal." (In 1935, Cullen published a version of *Medea*, becoming the first black American to translate a Greek tragedy.) His subjects were equally traditional: the transience of love ("Nothing endures/ Not even love"), mortality ("But time to live, to love, bear pain and smile,/ Oh, we are given such a little while!"), the suffering soul ("But I can only sing of what I know,/ And all I know, or ever knew, is woe"). "The word realism," Cullen acknowledged, "generally has a distasteful connotation."

Five years, and two more collections, later, Cullen had essentially dried up. He had "managed to maintain the role of the ephebe, the neophyte for several tears after the appearance of *Color*," Charles Molesworth writes in his new biography, but "the mantle of the 'boy poet' was already out of date."[2] Moreover, "the drive and promise he showed" in lyric poetry "tended to fade after 1930"—a realization not lost, perhaps, on Cullen himself, as shown in "Self-Criticism":

> Shall I go all my bright days singing,
> (A little pallid, a trifle wan)
> The failing note still vainly clinging
> To the throat of the stricken swan?

His later projects—a novel, a Broadway musical, children's books—ended in frustration. His *Medea* was a prose adaptation rather than a translation (as when Creon cries, "I'm not really a hard man, Medea. In fact, I am just about my own worst enemy"); "an interesting experiment in reducing a Greek tragedy to the content and colloquialism of a folk tale," *The New York Times* sniffed. He spent his last decade teaching at Frederick Douglass Junior High School (where his students included James Baldwin), writing but six more poems before he died from a cerebral hemorrhage in 1946 at the age of forty-three.

2 *And Bid Him Sing: A Biography of Countée Cullen*, by Charles Molesworth; University of Chicago Press, 304 pages, $30.

Cullen's fellow poetic prodigy of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes (only nineteen when he published his enduring poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"), was Cullen's antipode in both aesthetics—in contrast to Cullen's studiedly elevated diction, Hughes was devoted to free verse and considered his jazz poems part of "an era of revolt against the trite and outworn language of the understandable"— and temperament—while Cullen was graduating Phi Beta Kappa at New York University, Hughes was sailing to Nigeria as a seaman on a tramp steamer. Though initially friendly, their differences divided them, as has critical estimation, which now considers Hughes the superior poet, an inversion of opinion begun by Hughes himself. In a now-celebrated manifesto, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), Hughes championed his artistic perspective with snide allegations that Cullen's commitment to universal values constituted racial treason.

Molesworth, an arts columnist at *Salmagundi*, devotes his biography to rebutting "the hollow charge that Cullen was somehow less racially conscious than he should have been." Unfortunately, this effort shares the overall faults of his book, which is bizarrely disjointed—it reads like a collection of note cards not assembled into a narrative—opaquely argued, and incompetently written. (Not surprisingly, the acknowledgments list no editor, but the absence of a translator is startling, as Molesworth seems to write English as a second language.) Cullen hardly lacked racial awareness: consider only the titles of his poetry collections, *Color*, *Copper Sun*, *The Black Christ*. Where he differed from Hughes was in their conceptions of racial propriety.

Cullen was hailed as the poet laureate of the Renaissance; Hughes preferred to call himself the "poet low-rate," celebrating the demimonde in his jazz poems. Such a depiction of black life was anathema to black tastemakers, an attitude Cullen vigorously endorsed. "Whether they relish the situation or not, Negroes should be concerned with making good impressions," he wrote. "They cannot do this by throwing wide every door of the racial entourage, to the wholesale gaze of the world at large. Decency

demands that some things be kept secret; diplomacy demands it." (He granted art no license: "Let art portray things as they are, no matter what the consequences, no matter who is hurt, is a blind bit of philosophy.") Thus, he said, in a review of Hughes's collection, *The Weary Blues*, "Never having been one to think all subjects and forms proper for poetic consideration, I regard these jazz poems as interlopers in the company of the truly beautiful poems in other sections of the book." The very title he found objectionable; he wrote privately: "To me it seems that Langston will be doing a bad thing in adopting such a title."

Cullen's decorum was more to the taste of the black establishment: "In a time when it is the vogue to make much of the Negro's aptitude for clownishness or to depict him objectively as a serio-comic figure," W. E. B. Du Bois said in a review of *Color*, "it is a fine and praiseworthy act for Mr. Cullen to show through the interpretation of his own subjectivity the inner workings of the Negro soul and mind." As Jackson, a professor at the University of Vermont, writes, Du Bois "sought to boost Cullen less for his art alone than for what his art would prove about African American character." (So devoted was the older man that when Cullen's marriage to Du Bois's daughter—the ceremony, before 1,500 guests, was "the Harlem social event of the decade," writes David Levering Lewis, the foremost historian of the Renaissance—collapsed after six months following Cullen's confession of his homosexuality, Du Bois sided with his son-in-law.)

In one of life's little ironies, Cullen's lifelong desire to write a play brought him to the other side of the racial representation divide. In the early Thirties, he began a collaboration with Arna Bontemps to dramatize Bontemps's novel *God Sends Sunday*. After a decade, their work was projected as a Broadway musical, thanks to the interest and involvement of Arthur Freed, the legendary Hollywood producer, who envisioned it as a platform for Lena Horne. Renamed *St. Louis Woman*, the show was set to open in New York when it fell under attack, from both left and right—from the Communist newspaper *The People's Voice* and the NAACP's executive director, Walter White. Both sides considered the musical objectionable because, as White said, it "pictured Negroes as pimps, prostitutes, and gamblers with no redeeming characteristics."

Although Cullen attempted to forestall such criticism—he went as far as to meet with a group of Harlem notables, then tinkered with the script—White remained unyielding, applying pressure to Horne. The actress ultimately released a statement declaring that the show "sets the Negro back a hundred years," being "full of gamblers, no-goods, and I'll never play a part like that." Freed later told a reporter that Horne told him that she did not find her role in *St. Louis Woman* distasteful, but activists had been writing her letters calling her a "harlot" for wanting to appear in it, and telling her she was shaming the race. "She actually cried," Freed said. Ruby Hill replaced Horne when the show opened on Broadway in 1946, to limited success, despite an impeccable roster of talent: Rouben Mamoulian, the director of *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*, as director, a score by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer (the hits were "Come Rain or Come Shine" and "Any Place I Hang My Hat is Home") and a cast featuring Rex Ingram, the Nicholas Brothers and Pearl Bailey, making a scintillating Broadway debut. Cullen had died before this last frustration in a frustrated career.

Cullen's artistic constipation can hardly be attributed to racial retreat or to his antimodernist devotion to tradition; his fellow Renaissance poet Claude McKay was an even more accomplished (and powerful) sonneteer. Rather, his limitations seem the consequence of his virtues: his precocity and facility, his academicism and what he himself called his "chief problem . . . that of reconciling a Christian upbringing with a pagan inclination." Cullen never liberated himself from his adoptive father, the redoubtable Reverend Frederick Asbury Cullen, pastor of one of Harlem's foremost churches, Salem Methodist Episcopal; indeed, he remained in the Reverend Cullen's fourteen-room brownstone virtually all of his adult life. The father constantly urged him to write explicitly devotional verse; the son's efforts to comply are predictably banal:

In Bethlehem
On Christmas morn,
The lowly gem
Of love was born.

"But Christian tongues are trained to babble/ In such a bitter way," Cullen might complain, but he also knew he was shackled:

I fast and pray and go to church,
And put my penny in,
But God's not fooled by such slight tricks,
And I'm not saved from sin.

I cannot hide from Him the gods
That revel in my heart,
Nor can I find an easy word
To tell them to depart

Far safer emotionally were his pallid exercises in tribute: to Keats, to Joseph Conrad, to Paul Laurence Dunbar, evidence of wide reading and little understanding.

Like his career, Cullen's poems are best in the beginning; as they lengthen, they seldom develop, the initial inspiration (too slight to be called an idea) being all and everything. He shows best in a series of epigrammatic epitaphs, their brevity suited to the sophomoric wit—"For a Cynic":

Birth is a crime
All men commit;
Life gives them time
To atone for it;
Death ends the rhyme
As the price for it.

"For a Virgin":

For forty years I shunned the lust
Inherent in my clay;
Death only was so amorous
I let him have his way.

"For a Mouthy Woman":

God and the devil still are wrangling
Which should have her, which repel;
God wants no discord in his heaven;
Satan has enough in hell.

Cullen's most accomplished poem—the one time he was struck by Randall Jarrell's lightning—is his best known, "Incident":

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.

The poem remains a stab in the heart, the ugly power of the epithet undiminished despite the ubiquitous vulgarities of hip-hop or the greasy hypocrisies of political correctness ("the N-word"). Yet its power is inseparable from its bordering on the bathetic. Its effect depends equally on simplicity and simple-mindedness. Cullen's observations were those of a child who never grew up, just as his mastery of Western poetics was, so to speak, verbal, not intellectual. "The sadness of his career," the black critic Darryl Pinckney has written, "lies in his inability to claim as his own the tradition he admired, to conceive of it as something to be inherited and added to. He borrowed it and handed it back, like a poor relation careful to show his painful good manners." The ultimate irony of Cullen, as for too many other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, is that while they protested that blacks should not be *circumscribed* by race from the themes and techniques of the Western tradition, they were unable to conceive how race might *amplify* that tradition. Trying to prove themselves equal, they rendered themselves secondary. Countee Cullen's career ended when he discovered how little he had—or would permit himself—to say.

How beautiful upon the mountains

by David Mason

Poets can be a petty, vindictive lot. This was never true of Anthony Hecht (1923–2004), though he sometimes suffered the vindictiveness of others. In the 1960s he recommended Louis Simpson for a Guggenheim Fellowship. Simpson responded, tit for tat, by promising he would nominate Hecht for readings on University of California campuses. As it came to pass, Guggenheim smiled on Simpson, and that was the last Hecht heard of it—no invitation from the Golden State. Recalling these events in a letter to the English publisher Philip Hoy in 2000, Hecht was characteristically urbane: "And so, after the passing of years I was living alone in quiet bachelorhood in Rochester, NY." A phone call came from the California poet Henri Coulette, who wanted to interview him. "I was delighted to agree, and he duly turned up, and I came over with a bottle of booze, and we sat around his motel, drinking and talking for the better part of an afternoon." At the end of the interview Coulette revealed why the invitation to read in California had never arrived. Hecht writes:

> Henri had proposed my name with enthusiasm, but Louis Simpson, representing Berkeley, demurred. He explained that I suffered from a very pronounced speech defect, and that it would be a kindness not to expose me to public terror and humiliation. . . . Since Simpson was the only one of the group who could claim to know me personally, his word on the subject was final.

Anyone who knew both Hecht and Simpson, as I did, will find this hilarious, not only because Louis—a quirkily accomplished poet—was so erratic in his moods, but also because Tony Hecht had a voice that any trained classical actor would envy. The context of their rivalry was partly the change going on in American poetry at the time. Simpson was no doubt jealous of Hecht, but also appeared to despise his flouting of current fashion. Both poets were war veterans who wrote well of their experiences overseas, but Simpson had rejected the rhyme and meter of his early poems and was developing a voice like flattened beer while Hecht extended and deepened the complex attributes of his early style. Rereading his poems in preparation for this review, I felt as I often have—that Hecht was one of America's finest poets. In a time when clumsiness is exalted, when the blandest, most facile, prosaic, and intellectually stunted poetry meets the approval of editors, Hecht can seem utterly countercultural. His poetry is alternately baroque and brutal, always intelligent, sometimes mordantly funny and tender, and it represents a kind of beauty that for most modern poets is simply out of reach, if not out of bounds.

Now that an ample selection of his letters has been published, it is possible to understand more about the man and his work, and to appreciate the cultivated voice in everything he wrote.[1] Jonathan Post, who was a student of Hecht's at the University

1 *The Selected Letters of Anthony Hecht*, edited by Jonathan F. S. Post; Johns Hopkins University Press, 400 pages, $35.

of Rochester, has grouped these letters in seven chapters, starting with "Childhood and College," moving through World War II and Hecht's failed first marriage to a long academic career, a happy second marriage and, at last, "The Flourish of Retirement." What might sound at first like an unruffled ascent proves to be full of drama, not all of it fully illuminated yet, as well as the intellectual and artistic growth of a great poet. Hecht's voice shows occasional strain as his circumstances alter, but is more often remarkably controlled, witty, personable, and civilized in the best possible sense—never unaware of the barbarity human beings can exhibit.

The letters are nearly always a pleasure to read because Hecht, though very much a man of his time, wrote for the ages. These are consummately literary objects, well made as his poems were well made. They illuminate particular poems of Hecht's, but also range over diverse subjects such as painting, music, war, politics, and occasional gossip. As Post observes in his introduction, certain mysteries remain to be cleared up in a biography (and one is forthcoming from the Executive Editor of this magazine). How is it, for example, that the boy in the early letters from summer camp, who seems so happy and well adjusted, playing sports and singing soprano (Buttercup in *H.M.S. Pinafore*!), should later write of his childhood in a great poem, "Apprehensions," as a kind of hell: "I moved in a cloudy world of inference/ Where the most solid object was a toy/ Rake that my governess had used to beat me." In the poem we learn of his father's attempted suicide and his younger brother Roger's epilepsy, then end with a chilling conflation of the governess's Teutonic sadism and the Holocaust:

> She would be seated by a table, reading
> Under a lamp-shade of the finest parchment.
> She would look up and say, "I always knew
> That you would come home to me, that you'd
> come home."
> I would read over her shoulder, "*In der Heimat,*
> *Im Heimatland, da gibts ein Wiedersehen.*"
> An old song of comparative innocence,
> Until one learns to read between the lines.

When Hecht attended Bard College, until he was drafted and sent off to training and combat in Europe, his letters were all love and candor. He appears never to have hidden his life from his parents as young people often do, but openly discussed his feelings. Either his parents were capable of inspiring such candor in their eldest son or Hecht was wishfully trying to create a happier image of his home life. In addition to these letters, the strongest evidence we have comes in a book-length interview with Philip Hoy, where Hecht recalls, "I regarded my family as especially vulnerable to financial and social downward mobility." Though their fortunes rose and fell, Hecht's parents must have appreciated their artistic sons at some level—both turned out to be poets. One family friend was Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, who was enlisted to give Tony a skeptical view of the writer's life. Even so, when Hecht began writing seriously at Bard, he told his parents all about his attempts.

Despite the psychological and economic unease he felt, partly due to the Depression and the onset of war, Hecht remained able to ride out the darkness, at least for a time, with the subtly anarchic humor we can find throughout the letters. In college he had already refined a taste for comic verse—he eventually edited with John Hollander an anthology of double dactyls—but the Army experience, including combat, gave his humor a darker edge. Post reminds us that "Many of his classmates . . . were killed in the war." Hecht developed a strong antipathy for the absurdities of regimental life, the ambition and stupidity of certain officers, the boredom of routines and regulations. He served with the Ninety-seventh Infantry Division in France, Germany, and Czechoslovakia, and was on hand at the liberation of the concentration camp at Flossenbürg. This experience led to his being one of our most significant writers about the Holocaust in poems like "Rites and Ceremonies," "More Light! More Light!," "It Out-Herods Herod, Pray You, Avoid It," "The Book of Yolek," and "Sacrifice."

Letters written during the war are full of detailed observations but always careful not

to upset either the censors or his parents. He informs them he is well, notes the fact that his location has changed, but is remarkably understated in discussing the reasons: "I know that long periods of silence will not reassure you, but I'm sure you understand that I'm not always in a position to write letters." He made lifelong friends, particularly the fiction writer Robie Macauley, but otherwise found the whole experience futile: "This war, like the last, has accomplished nothing in a positive sense—only in the negative one of destroying an aggressor." Letters written long after the conflict, when he had no need to protect anyone, are more forthcoming about the horrors he witnessed, not only the heaped corpses at Flossenbürg, but also pointless woundings and deaths of his comrades. Finding himself at Fort Bragg in 1945, awaiting shipment to the Pacific theater, he tells his parents, "I cannot be satisfied with this animal existence."

That despairing line provides a clue to Hecht's aesthetics. His devotion to classical music and Renaissance painting and cities like Venice is of a piece with his manner as a poet, whether in dark, understated poems like "A Hill" or in a rococo masque like "A Love for Four Voices." The beauty Hecht found in great art had a way of compensating or consoling his lacerated soul, but the nightmare of history remained ineradicable. In a brilliant late letter to an old friend from college, Hecht discussed his two favorite fiction writers, James Joyce and Gustave Flaubert, both of them poets of earthiness who understood the desire for lyric transcendence. Hecht's own mixture of high and low diction owes much to these writers, as well as to W. H. Auden. With the latter he disagreed about accumulations of detail in writing, and in this Hecht was a fiction writer as well as a poet. He was, in fact, one of the very best writers of narrative verse in the modern era. Among his masterpieces in that genre I would list "Green: An Epistle," "Coming Home," "The Short End," and "The Venetian Vespers." Satirical and comedic triumphs would include "The Dover Bitch" and "The Ghost in the Martini."

But I'm getting ahead of my subject. In late 1945, stationed in postwar Japan, Hecht worked with his friend Macauley as a journalist for *Stars and Stripes*, at one point reporting on the community of Nazis living in that country, at another on a gruesome case of cannibalism. He makes trenchant observations about geopolitics after the Bomb, seeing clearly that atomic weapons, once used, can never be denied: "We cannot put knowledge away in a vault; it is much more lively than any of us." These letters are richly descriptive and lively, and despite some of the horrific subject matter he seems to have retrieved his good humor, writing at one point to his parents,

> Went to an old whore house today. Pretty lousy looking place. The girls weren't so hot either. But I got what I was looking for.
>
> I was looking for a piano.

After the war, Hecht led a peripatetic life in Europe and America. Letters from this period are full of wonderful anecdotes, such as his meeting with Marlon Brando in France. It was 1949 and Brando, on the cusp of his fame, competed with Hecht for the affections of a young model. Hecht won. Their fling was insouciant and mobile as they managed to meet in various locations. But Hecht had to make a living. It was his generation that solidified the position of poets in the academy. Unlike the generation of Eliot and Stevens, Hecht and most of his colleagues were professors. They were trained by the New Critics and came of age at a time when the largesse of grants and fellowships was relatively accessible, especially to writers with good connections. Hecht spent a brief time at the Iowa Writers Workshop (interrupted by a breakdown due to war trauma), a longer period under the tutelage of John Crowe Ransom and others at Kenyon, followed by graduate study at Columbia (where he knew Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac). He began to publish in *The Kenyon Review* and other magazines, and his circle of literary acquaintances, including Allen Tate, Robert Lowell, Flannery O'Connor, and others, continued to widen, sometimes providing him with opportunities to travel and teach.

His first collection of poems, *A Summoning of Stones*, appeared in 1954 to some respectful

notices, but few critics admire it anywhere near as much as his later work. Hecht's voice had not yet achieved its mature flexibility and range. More than a dozen years passed before he published his second book, *The Hard Hours*, which proved an astonishing advance in both style and subject matter, and won the Pulitzer Prize. What slowed him down was at least in part his marriage to Patricia Harris, a young model with whom he was ill-matched. Here again the letters leave something to the imagination. Hecht alludes to mental illness on her part, but offers few details. The couple had two sons, Jason and Adam, and, following their divorce in 1961, she took the boys with her to Europe and a new marriage. Hecht fell into a depression for which he had to be hospitalized and treated with Thorazine. This is the period of his correspondence with Anne Sexton, with whom he fell in love—their relationship was never consummated, and her increasingly confessional poetry eventually turned him off.

The Pulitzer and a tenured professorship at the University of Rochester were markers of prominence and stability in his life, but nothing did him so much good as his marriage in 1971 to Helen D'Alessandro, who had been a student of his when he taught at Smith. Hecht has always been known as a dark poet, even a "sick soul," in William James's phrase. But from this marriage onward moments of tenderness and joy occur as well, visible in works like "A Birthday Poem" and "Peripeteia" from *Millions of Strange Shadows* (1979). Suddenly the letters, too, make happier reading. There's a confidence in the voice, an ability to withstand various literary disappointments—almost as if that boy at summer camp had come to life again. At this point, the *Selected Letters* becomes a particularly heartening book because Hecht bestows such relish on his correspondence, allowing his opinions and intellect a freer expression. While his syntax remains customarily elaborate, it rarely feels clotted or thwarted as it sometimes had. I know he continued to have fits of temper on occasion, but Tony always struck me as keeping a measure of ebullience on reserve. This is confirmed by friends like Richard Wilbur, who remembers Tony's comedic performances at parties—reciting Milton's "Lycidas" in a W. C. Fields accent, for example. Tony was a man of immense dignity, and it was wonderful to know how much he liked a good joke. When he was young, he used a quotation from Isaiah as a comic refrain whenever good fortune came his way: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who bringeth tidings of great joy." The refrain recurs on the occasion of his marriage to Helen—their son, Evan, was born in 1972.

While the letters to certain literary contemporaries—especially Richard Howard, Karl Shapiro, Howard Moss, and his publisher Harry Ford—provide detailed readings of some of his most difficult poems, it is also worth dwelling on Hecht's friendships with younger poets, including Brad Leithauser, Edward Hirsch, David Lehman, Mary Jo Salter, B. H. Fairchild, Timothy Murphy, Norman Williams, Dana Gioia, and Ilya Kaminsky. He was extraordinarily generous with his time and advice. I met Hecht in the early 1980s, when I was a gardener in Rochester. I had been reading his poems in the public library, and thought he was the best thing going. When at thirty I entered graduate school and became his student, I learned that his severe countenance made some undergraduates quake with fear—Hecht never suffered fools of any sort—but I always found him warm and welcoming, increasingly so as we aged. To the young Brad Leithauser, Hecht provided a list of modern narrative poems, concluding "That's all that comes to mind, except for a lot of garbage." To a poet named Gary Metras, who had studied with him at Bread Loaf and received stinging criticism, he later remarked that his more recent poems were "so powerful and successful, so eloquent of strong, controlled emotions, that I am at the very least reassured that my coolness towards that early work did you no permanent damage." He finishes by quoting Frost with approval: "It's hard to know how much discouragement is good for a man." Four months later he wrote to Metras with advice about creative writing programs:

> I suspect that, given the talent, one may learn more informally than formally from a teacher,

> so it is best to study with a writer one admires rather than seek out an elaborate program or school with a fancy name. What I mean is that if I studied with Elizabeth Bishop, whose work I enormously admire, I would not expect to be instructed by her in matters of technique—which, after all, I could learn on my own, or by attempting to imitate her work—though no doubt she would go over my poems with me in instructive detail. But I would probably learn more, in the end, from her appraisals of other poets, especially if those appraisals were different from my own. Why should she like X and not Y? To be able to grasp those almost-never articulated standards and modes of taste is what I think of as the most valuable kind of literary education.

It's the diversity of Hecht's acquaintances as well as his opinions that makes his later comments so compelling. Figures like Father Timothy Healy, President of Georgetown University, which gave Hecht a professorship from 1985 until his retirement in 1993, and the architectural historian William MacDonald, received charming letters—with the latter Hecht kept up a long-running competition for the most exotic stationery and most hilarious sobriquet. Another poet of his generation, Daniel Hoffman, is thanked for seeing in "Rites and Ceremonies" not just echoes of Eliot but a serious dig at Possum's anti-Semitism. And Ira Sadoff, a poet very much unlike Hecht, is presented with a patient defense of the elaborate diction in "The Grapes."

Questions for a biographer continue to arise. How is it, for example, that the critic Denis Donogue, who had scathingly reviewed one of Hecht's best books, *Millions of Strange Shadows*, should be addressed many years later in the most friendly terms? And what really went on between Hecht and Louis Simpson? What is the rest of that story? Jonathan Post has decided to leave much of the filling in for a later writer. Still, there is more than enough in the *Selected Letters* to gratify readers already familiar with the life and the work, and also perhaps enough to edify someone coming to them for the first time.

It's remarkable how often the best poets sound the same in their letters and in their verse. Tony's voice is like no other, and can stand comparison with our best writers. In his graceful, productive retirement years he doubled his poetic output and contributed several new volumes of literary criticism while continuing to be one of the last great letter writers. Looking back on some of his letters to Harry Ford, he noticed "that they contain some juicy indiscretions regarding my opinions of certain poets and critics. Just the sort of thing that, judiciously edited, could make for a scandalously successful book." The book at hand may not prove to be a scandal, but it is judiciously edited, and it is a resounding success.

New poems
by A. E. Stallings & David Barber

Elegy

The finery of childhood—let them wear
It every day, in rain or shine. Don't lose
Your temper over patent leather shoes
Mud-puddle deep, or fret for Easter frocks,
Hand-smocked, that meet with chocolate or paint,
Let Sunday-best be mussed, new trousers tear,
Elbows of pure wool cardigans be rent,
Let silken ribbons stray, mismatch lace socks,
Let grape juice stain. For Someday comes to call
And finds the garment now too tight, too small,
Outmoded, out of season, itchy, quaint,
Stored up in lavender and mothballs. Let
Joy sport its raiment while still bright and loose,
Let what cannot be saved or spared be spent.
It's fitting: what is theirs is not your own,
The finery they did not spoil with use
That lies in drawers, unblemished and outgrown.

—A. E. Stallings

Denouement

Woolgathering afternoon:
All I've accomplished, all,
Is to untangle a wine-dark skein
And coil it into a ball.

I did not knit a swatch
For gauge—or cast a stitch—
Or pick a plausible pattern out,
I just unworked one hitch

After another, and went
Brailling along the maze,
Over, under, twist and turn,
To where the ending frays.

It's always best to leave
No glitches in the plot;
Sailors tell you that the yarn
Is weakest at the knot.

Open, do not tug
The little nooses closed,
Tease the cat from her cradle, lead
The minotaur by the nose

Out of the labyrinth
Through which all heroes travel,
And where the waiting wife will learn
To ravel's to unravel.

Out of the complicated,
Roll the smooth, round One,
So when it drops out of your lap
It brightly comes undone,

Leaping over the floor
Like swift ships outward-bound,
Unfurling the catastrophe
That aches to be rewound.

—A. E. Stallings

The stain

Remembers
Your embarrassment,
Wine or blood,
Sweat or oil,

When the ink leaked
Your intent
Because you thought
Truth couldn't soil,

Or when you let
The secret slip,
Or when you dropped
The leaden hint,

Or when between
The cup and lip,
The Beaujolais
Pled innocent,

Or when the rumor's
Fleet was launched,
Or when the sheets
Waged their surrender,

But the breach
Could not be staunched
And no apology
Would tender;

When over-served,
You misconstrued,
And blurbed your heartsick
On your sleeve;

When everything
Became imbued
With sadness, yet
You couldn't grieve.

Inalienable
As DNA,
Self-evident
As fingerprints,

It will not out
Although you spray
And presoak in the sink
And rinse:

What they suspect
The stain will know,
The stain records
What you forget.

If you wear it,
It will show;
If you wash it,
It will set.

—A. E. Stallings

Song of nothing

Farai un vers de dreit rein
—Guilhem IX (ca. 1070–1127)

I'll make a song out of nothing at all.
It's not about me or any living soul,
Nothing to do with lost youth or some doll
Or anything under the sun.
I dreamt it up last night behind the wheel
Waiting for the light to turn.

I have no clue how I came to be born.
I take no pleasure and I feel no pain.
I'm not a stranger and I'm not your friend.
What makes me tick is not my call—
Go ask the shadow that slipped on my skin
Out there beyond the pale.

I can't be certain if I'm asleep or awake.
Somebody tell me and make it quick.
Sometimes it's like my heart's about to crack
From a wound with no name,
But you won't hear a gripe out of this sad sack,
So help me Doubting Tom!

I'm sick to death and my nerves are shot,
But all I know is what I hear on the street.
I'm looking for a shrink who'll set me straight,
But where to start?
If there's a cure for what ails me—sweet.
If not, no big sweat.

I have a lover, but I don't know her.
We've never even met. Why bother?
She's done me no good, but no harm either
So far as I can tell—
She's not a housewife or a homewrecker,
Call her what you will.

We've never hooked up, but I swear she's the one.
I don't get my hopes up, so she never lets me down.
When we're not an item I get by just fine,
Don't lose any sleep.
I've got another flame with charm to burn
And she's just my type.

That's my ditty—sweet nothings for no one.
I'll inscribe it to a certain someone
Who'll croon it to my silver-tongued twin
On the redeye to Lotusland
And back will come the key to my fortune
In an unknown hand.

—David Barber

Of fast & loose

Now I'll tell you how
To knit a tight knot
In a bit of cloth
And then undo it
With a word or two.

You need to know how
To cinch it just so
With a touch of stealth
To keep the sweet spot
As free as it's taut.

You ought to show how
It's just what it's not
At a certain length
Until you start to
Utter your whatnot.

You must know by now
A dark art is but
A piece of the truth
You hide in plain sight
To do what you do

With a bit of show
And an oath or two
As if it were caught
As you let it out
With your bated breath.

—David Barber

Oak apple

If there's a worm, a year
To prosper. If a spider,
Woes without number.
If a fly, all will be fair.
If a core ajar, beware.

Year of the worm, you're
In clover. Fly in there, you're
In the clear. An eye for
An eye, murmurs the spider.
Neither hide nor hair, no cure.

Another year, another
Hoard to gather. O Sister
Wasp, what lot's in store?
Your cradle's our ledger.
Our knock's at your door.

Crack one open if you dare.
One thing ripens, the other
Festers. Here's your future
Lurking in its amber sphere,
Sweet or bitter, foul or fair.

If a worm this year, hunger
No more. If a fly, sing for
Your supper. If a spider,
Caterwaul you a river.
If no answer, say a prayer.

—David Barber

Theater

Verfremdungseffekt

by Kevin D. Williamson

Ann, the one-woman show about the late Texas Governor Ann Richards, is an odd little thing: Governor Richards falls well short of the stature one would normally associate with having a major theatrical production dedicated to one's life—if she is remembered at all, she will be remembered as a specimen belonging to a transitional species in the evolution of politics into a sub-phylum of celebrity, a missing link between Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama. Her career was bookended by two generations of Bushes: Her famous 1988 speech at the Democratic National Convention (partly ghostwritten by Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner) was celebrated for its half-clever personal attack on George H. W. Bush—"born with a silver foot in his mouth"—and her 1994 gubernatorial campaign against George W. Bush was likewise light on issues and heavy on personal opprobrium—she famously dismissed her opponent as "some jerk." She was on the losing side in both campaigns: George H. W. Bush placed his silver foot firmly in the Democrats' posterior with a forty-state Electoral College triumph, since unmatched, while in 1994 Governor Richards suffered an intra-party revolt when Gary Espinosa claimed more than a fifth of the Democratic primary vote and the debilitated incumbent was crushed by the future president. The most notable innovation of the Richards administration was the institution of a state-monopoly lottery in Texas—which is to say, a regressive opt-in tax on the poor and innumerate. But her most important—and most corrosive—contribution to American politics was probably a now-forgotten line in that celebrated DNC speech, accusing the FBI, DEA, and CIA of conspiring to smuggle cocaine into the United States, a pernicious myth that simply will not die. After her defeat, the more-Texan-than-thou Ms. Richards cashed in, became a pitchman for Doritos, and moved into a Manhattan apartment next to Kathleen Turner.

Governor Richards was nothing if not theatrical, but *Ann* does not identify the real drama in its subject's career. Before the DNC speech, Ann Richards was a relatively obscure functionary—state treasurer—deeply involved in the nuts-and-bolts of Texas Democratic politics. After the speech, she was a starry-eyed up-and-comer who saw Texas as a layover on her road to Washington, possibly to the White House. Which is to say, she was the prequel to Sarah Palin, and *Ann* is a comedy that should have been a tragedy.

The play is strangely structured: It begins as a commencement speech at an imaginary state university somewhere in the environs of Waco, Texas, not far from where Ann Richards was raised, though a critical part of her childhood was spent in San Diego. (In this regard, her journey was the opposite of that of her chief idolator, Molly Ivins, a California-born child of privilege who transformed herself into a cartoon Texan.) The middle part of the play consists of Governor Richards at her desk in Austin, barking orders to an unseen assistant and cooing to Bill Clinton on the telephone. This is the slowest section of the play, and

could have benefited from the attentions of a beady-eyed editor or three. Ann Richards talking about Ann Richards is, of course, something to behold: There is no denying the charisma and charm of the character herself, and Holland Taylor's performance in the role crackles with the same attractive energy that Ann Richards herself brought to the role of Ann Richards. And have no doubt: It was a role, a governorship made into performance art.

Ann is many miles short of being a warts-and-all portrait of the governor, though it has some very amusing moments, some moving ones, and a few that are both. Among them is the governor's discussion of her drinking problem, which manages to be all at once humorous, humane, and self-aggrandizing—the basic Ann Richards formula. "I was the poster child for functioning Alcoholics Everywhere. And I functioned all over the place. I must have drunk eleven hundred thousand martinis by the time I landed in AA. I like to think I broke a barrier for politicians with an addiction in their past. And nowadays, you can't hardly even get into a primary unless you've done time in rehab." A less hagiographical account might have noted that the real Ann Richards was somewhat less forthcoming on the issue of her addiction(s), especially the persistent questions about her use of illegal drugs.

Ms. Taylor, familiar to television viewers from her role in *Two and a Half Men*, does not really sound or look very much like Ann Richards, in spite of sporting the governor's sparkling white coiffure, perhaps the most painstaking historical recreation since James Cameron's *Titanic*. The accent comes and goes, but then so did Ann Richards's. But there is something basically right about her portrayal, in the same way that Anthony Hopkins and Frank Langella each managed to give us a true-to-life Richard Nixon without quite achieving verisimilitude. (In contrast with James Cromwell's George H. W. Bush, which was a thousand times more imposing and dreadful than the real thing.) There are some awkward moments, too, such as her halting delivery of purpose-built political sympathy lines designed to flatter the inclinations of the Lincoln Center audience. There is a bit of historical stumbling, too, such as her insistence that being a Democrat made it more difficult for her to be elected governor of conservative Texas; in reality, Bill Clements was the only Republican to precede Ann Richards as governor since Reconstruction, and George W. Bush, upon his election, was only the fourth Republican to hold the office in history. Some very dramatic moments were left out as well, most notable among them the spectacular self-destruction of the gubernatorial candidate Clayton Williams, the clownish Republican oilman whose ill-advised joking about rape—*plus ça change!*—was in no small part responsible for catapulting Richards into the governor's mansion.

Ann is that rarest of big-ticket theatrical productions—one that suffers from not being quite postmodern enough: It is a piece of political theater about a practitioner of theatrical politics that never quite gets its head around the self-consciously theatrical quality of Ann Richards's *dramatis persona*, a painfully (and at times embarrassingly) reverent portrayal of a woman famous for her irreverence.

I suppose we will just have to wait for a Shakespearean succession drama based on the Texas Railroad Commission.

At the far opposite end of the one-woman-political-show spectrum is *Jackie*, a trippy little treat that consists of the former first lady dragging the corpses of the men in her life around an abandoned swimming pool. It is less grotesque than it sounds.

The play about this most American of characters was written by the Austrian Elfriede Jelinek, who was largely unknown outside the Germanophone world until her novel *The Piano Teacher* was translated into a well-regarded film in 2001; in 2004, she won the Nobel Prize for literature. The translation here is undertaken by Gitta Honegger, who called the task "impossible," the direction is by the highly regarded Tea Alagić, and the acting burden falls upon Tina Benko, who is game and wry, if not quite up to the challenge. Like Ms. Taylor's portrayal of Ann Richards, Ms. Benko's task is partly impersonation and partly dramatic performance. She is at her best when she least

resembles Mrs. Kennedy, as when she directs an angry and profane tirade at the Barbie doll that serves as a stand-in for Marilyn Monroe. There is a good deal of physical comedy in the production, as well as a cute little mid-1960s Austin Powers-style dance number, and she excels at those moments.

Jackie Kennedy, both the dramatic character and the historical figure, is a Pop Art figure, one that perfectly expresses the application of the surfaces-only aesthetic of her period to public affairs: *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* as a campaign platform. Ms. Jelinek's script is at its best when it explores this aspect of Mrs. Kennedy, as in its long-but-clever disquisition on the subject of fashion and the relationship of the clothes to the clothed. Her observations regarding the complex relationship between fashion as a concealer and fashion as a revealer are far from original, but in the context of the Kennedy myth, they are both apt and interesting. But there is a great deal of competition in the field of deconstructing Kennedy cultism; watching Jackie, I could not help thinking of Collaborative Stages 2009 production of *The House of Yes* (see *The New Criterion*, November 2009), which had a number of advantages over this production: a plot, characters, and an absence of self-conscious wordplay of the sort that was thought very clever by academics circa 1988. Indeed, for all its oddball pleasures, the play seems to be intellectually stuck in the Cold War—perhaps not surprising, given the political inclinations of Ms. Jelinek, who was a devoted activist in the Austrian Communist Party right up until the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Not that the play touches much on the big issues of the Kennedy era—it resolutely ignores them, in fact—but it does perfectly encapsulate the intellectual and aesthetic style of the late Cold War period, when the intellectual class that had so long been enamored of the faux revolutionary spirit of Communism found itself stranded between the fully unmasked nightmare of the holocaust it had enabled and a triumphal Western liberalism that it could not quite bring itself to embrace, retreating instead into high-class word games, half-baked Continental critical theory, Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, the post-post-Freudians—anything but reality.

It is for this reason that Ms. Honegger was right to describe the prospect of translating the work into satisfactory English as "impossible." (Whether the German is satisfactory I cannot say. Perhaps our famously intellectual president might share his assessment of the prose in the "Austrian" language he wrongly believes to exist.) PoMo wordplay is a tough sell on stage in even the most capable of hands. Here we have passages such as: "I cast myself as a cast—plaster, but not plastered, and not my waist. My waist isn't cast in plaster, and my hair isn't plastered. It's lacquered!" Ms. Benko does what she can with the language—her coquettish deliver of "It's lacquered!" just barely saves the moment—but the language is in many places as dead as the corpses Jackie is burdened with.

About those corpses: Ms. Benko's first action is to crawl up out of a swimming-pool drain dragging a string of stylized bodies made from duct tape and labeled "Jack," "Ari," "Bobby," etc.—there are a number of tiny corpses attached as well, representing her lost children. Ms. Jelinek's script is unsparing of President Kennedy's treatment of women, including his transmission to Jackie of the chlamydia he acquired somewhere in his womanizing career, which she blames for her miscarriage. The play acknowledges the ambiguity of Mrs. Kennedy's role in her husband's notorious sexual career—she is partly a victim and partly an enabling coconspirator—but it fails to exploit the dramatic tension in the situation. *Jackie*'s Jackie is a knowing cynic, one who objects to her husband's dalliance with Marilyn Monroe not because the star is horning in on the first lady's marriage but because she is horning in on the first lady's celebrity. One of the play's funniest moments occurs when Jackie goes off on a rant in which she argues that Ms. Monroe is a minor figure, one who doesn't matter, while a shower of those Marilyn stand-in Barbie dolls rains into the swimming pool.

If there were a Tony award for the climbing of ladders in heels, Ms. Benko would win it. Because there is no plot, Ms. Alagić's direction

relies on a great deal of action, some of it frenetic and much of it pointless. Jackie goes up the swimming-pool ladder, she goes down the ladder; I don't know why, but she does it with style and grace, and perhaps that is the point.

But for all of the defects of the script and the limitations of the production, there is something to *Jackie*. The constant flash of Ms. Benko's ice-blue eyes is an inescapable reminder that the play is something other than *An Evening with Jackie Kennedy*, and the act of taking a theatrical wrecking ball to the myth of Camelot has some solid dramatic interest. Ms. Benko has some real gifts as an actress, and, unlike Governor Richards, Mrs. Kennedy is an enduring figure of fascination, a testament to the very peculiar modern fact that it is possible to have a career as a figure of some historical importance with nothing to recommend one's self other than the habit of being extraordinarily well-dressed. I found myself thinking of Oscar Wilde's observation: "A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied." *Jackie*'s charms and its bright, hard moments of bitchy good humor are that kind of pleasure, too. But if they're handing out Nobel Prizes for that sort of thing, Joan Rivers has been cheated.

Ms. Alagić, a product of Yale, directed a performance of *Baal* in New Haven, and *Baal* has now been reimagined in *Clive*, a new play directed by Ethan Hawke, who also plays the title role. *Clive* is advertised as being "based on, inspired by, and stolen from *Baal*," which began life as the twenty-year-old Bertolt Brecht's *Baal Eats! Baal Dances! Baal Is Transfigured!* This version might well have been called *Baal Fornicates!*, but then audiences would need to know who and what Baal is in the context of European literature, which would get us into the Old Testament and all that, and the off-Broadway audience circa Anno Domini 2013 cannot possibly be expected to do that sort of heavy lifting. So we have *Clive*, in which the titular object/practitioner of idolatry is a would-be rock star down and out in New York City, directing such energy as he has into serial seductions and the important business of drinking himself into an early grave.

In contrast to Ms. Honneger's high-minded industriousness in translating *Jackie* from prize-winning German into occasionally passable English, the team behind *Clive* began by plugging Brecht's play into Google Translate and working from the document thereby produced. The results are not inferior. Mr. Hawke brings his easy movie-star charisma to the role, which is essential—Clive would be utterly inexplicable minus the diabolical attractiveness with which he enlivens the character. To his credit, Mr. Hawke gives every appearance of being genuinely interested in new and inventive theater, where a great many of his Hollywood colleagues seem to treat theater as an act of penance, as a place to be shriven for the sin of making money in dumb movies and to be reconciled to the idealistic artistic aims they must have harbored at some point in their careers.

What happens is this: Clive is invited to the home of a big-time music producer in the hopes of being signed to his label for a fat advance. But the only advance forthcoming is the one Clive makes on the producer's wife, thereby derailing his musical career. There is an assortment of colored powders on offer: The blue one speeds you up, the brown one slows you down—and the white one? "It makes you stand in front of a mirror talking about yourself while planning to get more of it." Ah, cocaine humor—a line that might have been lifted from a Robin Williams set in 1981, and very well may have been: The play exults in the bits and pieces it lifts, uncredited, from other works. Clive is a thief—of hearts, of innocence, and of Johnnie Walker Blue Label—and *Clive* is a thief, too.

But Mr. Hawke is a great deal of fun to watch as the downwardly mobile artist/bum, and the great Vincent D'Onofrio, with a shaved head and horseshoe mustache, is tremendous—in every sense of the word—as his foil, Doc, who sometimes plays Mephistopheles to Clive's Faust, and sometimes Lenny to his George. Mr. D'Onofrio may earn his bread in dumb cop shows, but the cracked menace of his turn as the mad Leonard Lawrence in *Full Metal Jacket* is always there. Clive is not so much a character as a type—the well-worn

Brechtian type—but Doc is a full-fledged person, a memorable character. In life he is a buffoon, but after his death he watches over the remainder of the play as an angel, and Mr. D'Onofrio manages to make him at once comic and august.

There is some terrific and inventive music in the play. Aside from an excursion into obviousness—a Brecht-derived play about a failed rock star simply must, I suppose, include the "Alabama Song" from Brecht and Kurt Weill's collaboration in *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, famously recorded by The Doors—the music is of real interest. It begins with a more or less conventional bit of well-harmonized Americana, and then takes a turn into the strange. Various musical instruments are built into the stage; they include a kind of hammered dulcimer built into a door frame, a plucked xylophone built into another piece of stage architecture, a sort of giant bass harp elsewhere, and a few other devices. These found-object instruments are the work of Gaines, the two-man sound-design project overseen by brothers Latham and Shelby Gaines, who also worked with Mr. Hawke to similarly satisfying effect in his production of Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* (see *The New Criterion*, April 2010). The music is somewhat reminiscent of that produced by the collaboration of Robert Wilson and Tom Waits in *The Black Rider*, but it is more musical and more lyrical. Mr. Hawke's guitar playing is not very good, but then it does not have to be and probably is not intended to be. Dana Lyn, entrusted with fiddle and piano duties, is very able in the more conventional musical pieces, and the rest of the performers manage such singing and playing as is required of them with aplomb. The songs themselves are perhaps not that memorable, but the production succeeds in creating a unique sonic atmosphere that contributes greatly to the play.

There is a great deal of high Brechtian (or is it low Brechtian?) melodrama in *Clive*: The teenage virgin who drowns herself in the river after being seduced and discarded by the titular cad (Is there a seventeen-year-old virgin in New York City?), the descent from boho to hobo, Clive wallowing in misery as he dies alone. There are also some flashes of brilliance, as when a character demands to know: "Is this champagne stolen? I prefer the taste of stolen champagne." Clive himself has a great sense of absurdist humor, as when he convinces a group of not-very-bright men on the make that he has a brother with a madness for bulldogs, one who is willing to pay top dollar for bulldogs brought to the bar of a particular hotel. Why? Because the prospect of a gaggle of greedy men showing up in a respectable hotel lobby, abject in their disappointment, their arms full of squirming bulldogs, strikes Clive as "beautiful." (And it sort of would be, no?)

I am not at all sure that Brecht still has anything interesting to say to us, though I do enjoy much of the music he produced with Weill. *Clive* itself is an interesting counterpoint to *Ann* and *Jackie*, an exploration of the ugly appetites undergirding the culture of celebrity and extending well beyond the realm of celebrity proper. And for a bunch of angst-ridden nihilists, these German Expressionists turn out to be an awfully moralistic lot; they may wallow in degradation, but they do so for their own moral ends, obscure as those may be, and *Clive*, to its credit, does not elide that. *Clive*'s world is a manmade Hell, even if Doc is watching from Heaven. Mr. Hawke and company are very proud of the play's *Verfremdungseffekt*—its estranging effect—but for all the constant reminders of the artifice of the stage, *Clive* is not so strange at all, only the heightened expression of familiar people in a familiar world.

Art

Pre-Raphaelites in Washington

by Karen Wilkin

"The English don't really like art," a celebrated (English) abstract sculptor told me, some time ago. "We like literature and nature—gardens and landscape. That's why we admire all those artists who go for walks in the woods and collect rocks or bend down trees or build stone walls. And that's why we're so much more interested in art that tells a story than in any other kind."

I kept thinking about that characterization as I walked through "Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Art and Design, 1848–1900," at the National Gallery, Washington, D.C., encountering meticulously rendered painting after meticulously rendered painting with complicated moral messages, arcane literary subjects, and glimpses of nature presented with near-scientific accuracy.[1] The first major exhibition in the U.S. to be devoted to these enigmatic artists, the show was organized by Tate Britain in collaboration with the National Gallery. To judge from the catalogue, "Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Art and Design" was even more comprehensive in London, but it's still a large, ambitious effort in Washington, with about 130 works, including paintings, drawings, sculpture, works on paper, tapestries, furniture and decorative arts, plus the occasional photograph. There's a lot to look at and, given the emphasis on narrative and messages—not to mention the sometimes overwhelming amount of detail with which these narratives and messages are presented—there's a lot to decipher. Pre-Raphaelite works demand close attention, reference to their sources, and careful looking—"close reading" in a literal sense—if they are to yield their full intentions, so the viewer must be equipped with both stamina and willingness to put in the time. For those who like that sort of thing, as they say, this is the sort of thing they like, and based on the responses of my fellow critics at the press preview, they like it a lot. (In the interest of full disclosure, I should say that while I found the exhibition to be extremely informative, it failed to make me a convert to the Pre-Raphaelite cause.)

The show does a fine job of tracking the formation and the main concerns of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood—PRB, as they inscribed their pictures—beginning with its foundation in 1848, when a group of very young painters banded together to declare their opposition to the pictorial norms that dominated English art at the time. The leading members of the original group, handsomely represented near the beginning of the installation in a wall of sensitive portrait and self-portrait drawings, were John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and William Holman Hunt (twenty-one, twenty, and nineteen, respectively), along with their slightly older friend Ford Madox Brown (twenty-seven). Brown never formally joined the PRB but acted as a kind of mentor to his colleagues, since

1 "Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Art and Design, 1848–1900" opened at the National Gallery, Washington, D.C. on February 17 and remains on view through May 19, 2013.

he shared many of their aspirations. Those aspirations, according to a catalogue essay by two of the exhibition's three curators, Tim Barringer of Yale University and Jason Rosenfeld of Marymount Manhattan College—Alison Smith of Tate Britain is the third—could be described as "innovative stylistic choices and reformist aesthetic, social, political, and religious thinking." The Brotherhood, the curators tell us, not only wanted to transform British painting through their near-obsessive attention to the particulars of the visible world, but also "intended to sow the seeds of widespread reform of society through advanced art and design." (It's useful to remember that Victorians, especially middleclass urban Victorians, were enthusiastic formers of associations and societies of all kinds and, probably because of the appalling conditions in their cities, equally enthusiastic, high-minded social reformers.) The Brotherhood's desire for aesthetic change led them to base everything in their paintings on scrupulous observation of the real thing. Landscape settings were painted on the spot, with figures fitted in from models posed in the studio; furnishings of interiors, tools, and other accoutrements were carefully studied and described. Whether that transformed British painting, as the PRB hoped it would, is still moot, *pace* Stanley Spencer and Lucian Freud at their most concentrated. As to the second and more ambitious of their intentions, while it's hard to assign "widespread reform of society" to the Brotherhood's efforts, there's little doubt that the burgeoning British Aesthetic movement of the 1860s and the widespread Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century have their origins in Pre-Raphaelitism. (Although the Brotherhood might not have approved, so does the young Oscar Wilde's early, flamboyant persona—the one parodied by Gilbert and Sullivan as the poet Bunthorne in *Patience*—and his espousal of the credo of art for art's sake.) An even more direct manifestation was the circle of still younger painters, plus one poet and designer, who formed around Rossetti in the 1850s. The painters included Edward Burne-Jones and his less familiar colleagues Elizabeth Siddall and Simeon Solomon. The poet-designer? William Morris. While he may not have managed to stem the rising tide of mass-produced, bourgeois Victorian furniture that threatened to inundate British homes, Morris's ravishing textiles and wallpapers, ingenious furniture, tiles, and gorgeously produced books, all of which have close connections with the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, provided an enduring alternative. (See Liberty of London fabrics and carefully selected items in most British museum stores.)

Even in its somewhat abridged American version, the exhibition includes some of the best known, textbook examples of the Pre-Raphaelites' efforts, organized more or less chronologically, but mainly thematically according to such categories as History, Salvation, Nature, Beauty, and Mythologies. Elegantly installed in ways that evoke the period, the exhibition ranges from works made during the first years of the Brotherhood's existence, such as Millais's relentlessly specific *Christ in the House of His Parents (The Carpenter's Shop)* (1849–50, Tate), to late embodiments, such as Hunt's feverish, Technicolor extravaganza, *The Lady of Shalott* (ca. 1888–1905, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT). The former, described as "the most controversial picture in the early years of the Brotherhood," largely because of Millais's refusal to idealize his subjects, presents a group of thin, anxious-looking characters in a shallow, box-like space, rather like a stage-set. On one side, we see into a deeper space with stored lumber while, on the other, a tightly pressed "audience" of interested sheep peers over a wattle fence, through an open doorway. Millais seems to have aimed at the kind of disguised symbolism common in Netherlandish Renaissance painting, in a rather pedestrian interpretation. Jesus has punctured his hand on a nail in a door that Joseph is building. A drop from the wound falls on his foot. Mary kneels to comfort him. (So far we get it.) A slightly older child carries a bowl of water to wash the wound—John the Baptist. There's a pigeon standing in for the dove of the Holy Spirit and the sheep, of course, are the faithful. All this and a floor littered with shavings, tools hung on the wall,

sharply defined edges, textures, and minutiae throughout, with some of the intense color of quattrocento predella panels.

At its first showing, Millais's painting was derided for what was viewed as the impropriety of showing the Holy Family as working-class types, and unlovely working-class types at that. A real carpenter apparently posed for the lean, sinewy Joseph, Millais is said to have spent the night in a carpenter's shop, soaking up the atmosphere, and the sheep were based on heads from a local butcher. That this desire for fidelity to real experience could be problematic makes sense only if we take as our standard of excellence "the Grand Manner," as advocated by Sir Joshua Reynolds in his addresses to the graduating students of the Royal Academy of Art. Nothing, Sir Joshua advised, should be specific, irregular, or individual—neither fabrics, the style of clothing, nor the figures themselves; instead everything was to be generalized in pursuit of the ideal. Nature's imperfections were to be corrected by her perfections, in the way that Raphael was said to have combined the best attributes of many different women to create an ideally beautiful Madonna. But Sir Joshua delivered his last Discourse on Art to the Academy in 1791. Did his standards still prevail in the mid-nineteenth century? I haven't spent enough time in the historical sections of Tate Britain and there aren't enough works in the "pre-Pre-Raphaelite" section of the Washington installation to permit an informed opinion. Yet, at just about the same time that *Christ in the House of his Parents* was exhibited, across the Channel, Gustave Courbet insisted that his only teacher was nature, and he had the inhabitants of his home town of Ornans pose for his enormous scene of a village funeral. In light of this, it's hard to understand why Millais's far less radical picture should have provoked such opprobrium—not that Courbet's work was universally admired.

That the PRB might occasionally stretch their definition of working from strict observation is suggested by Hunt's *The Lady of Shalott*, painted more than four decades after *Christ in the House of His Parents*. Like most of the works in the exhibition, *The Lady of Shalott* is based on a literary theme, specifically, Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem about the cursed Arthurian maiden condemned to spend her days alone, in a tower, weaving tapestries of scenes she may view only in a mirror—that is, until Sir Lancelot rides by and she cannot resist looking at the real thing. Then, Tennyson tells us,

> Out flew the web and floated wide;
> The mirror crack'd from side to side;
> "The curse is come upon me," cried
> The Lady of Shalott.

Hunt portrays this moment as kaleidoscopic, chromatic chaos. The Lady, a characteristic Pre-Raphaelite straight-nosed, heavy-jawed beauty wearing a fantastic multi-hued garment that may owe something to the "Venetian Renaissance" designs of Mariano Fortuny, stands in the ruins of her fraying tapestry, tangled in its threads, vast amounts of hair swirling. The space is fragmented by a reflected view, patterns, images, decorations, flying doves, the elaborate legs of the strange circular weaving frame, and an even stranger multi-spouted samovar-thing that stands, improbably, within the circle of the tapestry frame.

The Lady's wooden pattens seem oddly familiar. Then we remember the clogs in Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), a painting acquired with much fanfare by the National Gallery, London, in 1842. With its suave surface, its wealth of sumptuous textures, its radiant color, and its almost invisible detail—such as the figures reflected in the mirror and the scenes from the life of Christ in the mirror frame's rondels—the much admired *Arnolfini Portrait* became a kind of touchstone for the Pre-Raphaelites. All those pouting maidens, heads bent under the weight of their masses of hair, may have their origins in Botticelli, there may be echoes of Fra Angelico in the limpid color and crisply delineated shapes, but the ferocious attention to minutiae, the jewel-like color, and the desire to fill every inch of space may be traced to Van Eyck's mesmerizing portrait.

Sharing the far end of the Pre-Raphaelite spectrum with *The Lady of Shalott* are a trio of large panels, *The Rock of Doom*, *The*

Doom Fulfilled, and *The Baleful Head* (1885–87, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart)—the ominous titles are typical—commissioned from Burne-Jones by the young, rising, conservative politico Arthur Balfour for his London drawing room. The series, based on the Perseus myth as retold in an epic poem by William Morris, remained incomplete, but Burne-Jones clearly had a fine time with the works he finished, playing an elongated, nude Andromeda, seen both fore and aft, chained to her rock, against waves cribbed from Botticelli, rocks from Gentile Bellini, and, in the most memorable painting—a rear view—against a tubular, coiled sea monster and a struggling Perseus in armor as sleek as the monster's rubbery loops.

A few photographs enrich the mix, including some of Julia Margaret Cameron's intense "portraits" of women dressed as characters from literature. (A friend of Rossetti's, Cameron sent him prints of her photographs, including one of those on display in Washington, images whose close-up, tightly framed compositions may have influenced the painter's own close-up, tightly framed compositions, such as the exhibition's equivocal *Monna Vanna* [1866, Tate], a half-length, self-absorbed, pseudo-Renaissance fashion plate.) Additionally, there are excellent examples of Morris and his cohorts' expansion of the purview of "advanced art and design" into tapestries, fabric, furniture, wallpaper, stained glass, and lavishly designed, richly illustrated, beautifully produced books.

But the exhibition's strength is its selection of works emblematic of the Brotherhood, such as Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853–54, Tate)—a young kept woman, in a modish, rather vulgar interior, wearing what may be a peignoir, rises from the lap of her fashionably dressed lover, as she realizes the error of her ways. In Washington, Hunt's *The Light of the World* (1851–52, Keble College, Oxford)—Christ, illuminated by a lantern, slightly backlit by a halo, knocking at a door—is hung as a pendant, at right angles to the scene of penitence, promising salvation. There's Rossetti's, early, narrow, compressed version of the Annunciation, in which a vertical, levitating, wingless angel offers a stem of lilies to an apprehensive blond teenager who shrinks back to the corner of her bed. The protagonists' white garments, the white bedclothes, and the white stucco walls are nicely orchestrated, punctuated with surprising geometric shapes of red, blue, and paler blue. (Given the cold opulence of Rossetti's later "Venetian" female portraits, such as *Monna Vanna*, this early work seems positively austere.) There's Millais's *Mariana* (1850–51, Tate)—a full-length "portrait" of a character in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* originally drawn from Tennyson , stretching after hours of dreary embroidery, exasperated by the feckless behavior of her *fidanzato*. Millais's *Ophelia* (1851–52, Tate) floats in a fantastic gown amid fanatically precise botanical specimens. And much more.

An impressive number of the Brotherhood's early works on view in Washington, including Millais's *Mariana*, his painting of Noah's daughters-in-law comforting an exhausted dove who returned to the ark with an olive sprig, and Hunt's staging of a pivotal scene from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, were discussed and defended by John Ruskin, the most celebrated art critic in Britain, in a series of letters to *The Times* of London written between 1851 and 1853. Ruskin shared many of the initially hostile responses to the Brotherhood's work, especially the widespread dislike of the class and appearance of their chosen models, who were generally found to be "low" and unbeautiful. But he was quick to praise the young artists' ambition and accomplishment, and to defend them from charges of inaccuracy, bad drawing, or copying from photographs. "Pre-Raphaelitism has but one principle," Ruskin wrote, "that of absolute, uncompromising truth in all that it does, obtained by working everything, down to the most minute detail, from nature, and from nature only." Ruskin's championing the group signaled an important change in the reputation of the PRB, but the fact that their initial reception was less than enthusiastic, however, brings us to what may be the most vexing aspect of the show.

The curators stress that we should think of the Pre-Raphaelites as vanguard artists who challenged the norms of their day. Witness the outcry when the works were first shown,

they remind us, about unappetizing models, garish color, lack of idealizing, and all the rest of it. The movement, we are told, was triggered by modernity, in an effort to return to fundamental truths during a time of industrialization, mass production, and fast developing technology that included both trains and photography. Yet does this really make Pre-Raphaelitism vanguard? The Brotherhood's response to modernity—apart from their gleeful adoption of the most intense new colors available, the equivalent of the bright, newly developed synthetic textile dyes recently developed for commercial use—was to look to the past both for subject matter and for stylistic and aesthetic values. Scenes and characters from Shakespeare, Dante, and Arthurian legend abound, along with obscure moments from history and, from time to time, religious themes, which were sometimes suspected of being dangerously (regressively) "papist." The Brotherhood were rarely "painters of modern life" except for works such as *The Awakening Conscience*; even portraits done from life, as the installation's "Beauty" section reveals, seem to have been aestheticized and medievalized. Sometimes accused of working from photographs, the PRB appear to have issued a deliberate challenge to the medium by loading their paintings with more detail than the eye or even the camera could see.

The cumulative effect is to make it very difficult to think of the PRB as a vanguard movement, especially when, to eyes educated by modernism, their work appears to be irreducibly Victorian and, for the most part, literal and illustrational, wholly dependent upon the generating text for full effect. But the curators argue that the paintings were conceived not as illustrations but as imaginative improvisations on their sources, offering as proof Tennyson's initial dislike of The *Lady of Shalott* because of the "addition" of tangling threads and flying hair. I remain unconvinced. Yet the idea explains why the Pre-Raphaelites are the focus of attention now, when art history is dominated by deep mistrust of works of art that are unsupported by verbal explication. Interestingly, a few paintings hint at an alternative approach. The light-washed, post-rainstorm farm meadow that forms the background of Millais's *The Blind Girl* (1854–56, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery)—a painting discussed by Ruskin—marvelously evokes a specific moment in purely visual terms. Here, the green-gold light and dark sky are far more compelling than the nominal subject, a young, blind street musician who shelters a younger child gazing at a magnificent double rainbow. Also suggestive is Brown's painting of a blond mother, in eighteenth-century costume, showing her tow-haired infant daughter a meadow full of what the title calls "baa-lambs." Clearly painting *en plein air*, the picture is an investigation of how things—including figures—are revealed by light. If only the Brotherhood had realized that this alone could be enough to justify a painting.

Exhibition notes

"Piero della Francesca in America"
The Frick Collection, New York.
February 12–May 19, 2013

Piero della Francesca's *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels* (ca. 1460–70), once encountered, is not easily forgotten or, for that matter, absorbed. A cornerstone of The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, *Virgin and Child* is a wildly unpredictable picture, though its stoic demeanor offsets its radical nature. There are Piero's angels: they are, if not exactly wedged into the rectangular format, book-ended significantly within its edges, their wings offering only a hint of "escape" from the picture's confines. Piero has increased the scale of the human form for mother and child, rendering them mountainous. A painted architectural frieze running along the top of the composition crowns the Virgin's head, pressurizing Piero's diorama. Space, once stated, is made shallow, stark and stage-like. Combined with the milky green pallor of the angels and Piero's exacting geometry, *Virgin and Child* is revealed as a pictorial machine whose logic threatens to collapse even as it holds true.

Virgin and Child is a devotional image, of course, and its function as such is inescapable and ineradicable. Piero's artistic liberties endow the figures with an immovable gravitas that keys into their spiritual vitality. As the centerpiece of "Piero della Francesca in America," the Clark's Piero is a stand-in for the lost central panel of The Sant'Agostino Altarpiece, a gilt-framed edifice once situated in a church located in Piero's birthplace, Borgo San Sepolcro. The commission took fifteen years to complete, roughly from 1454–1469, and was—if we are to believe that inveterate booster of the High Renaissance, Giorgio Vasari—"highly praised" in its day. The altarpiece was dismantled in 1555. Hometown admirers of Piero's art preserved many of the panels, but only eight are still extant—six are currently at the Frick, four being mainstays of the collection. The other paintings are borrowed from The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and Portugal's Museo Nacional de Arte Antigua.

You can't blame Nathaniel Silver, Guest Curator and former Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow at the Frick, for fudging the exhibition's geographical purview by including the Lisbon *Saint Augustine* (1454–69). Its original location was, after all, named for the world historical figure—that, and it's a spectacular painting. We don't think of Piero as a showboat, but his portrait of the church father is an almost ostentatious tour-de-force. With his salt-and-pepper beard and knitted brow, Saint Augustine cuts a dour figure—fitting for the man who maintained the importance of original sin. But contemporary viewers will be taken by the inventiveness with which Piero has delineated Augustine's vestments. Forget the sumptuous attention paid to material verisimilitude—a tough call given the razor-edged concision with which, say, St. Augustine's crystal staff has been delineated. Instead, it is the title figure's miter and cope that dazzle. They are compendiums of scenes illustrating the life of Christ—paintings within a painting. Narrative function, theological authority, and pictorial clarity reach a meticulous détente. Piero was some kind of artist.

An obvious statement, perhaps, but Piero had pretty much been forgotten by the end of the sixteenth century—a hundred years after his death in 1492. (He was born circa 1415.) It wasn't until the nineteenth century that Piero was rediscovered and into the next century when Piero-mania gained momentum. No less an eminence than Bernard Berenson expressed astonishment at this newfound "mass admiration"—particularly since Berenson had, earlier in his career, felt it necessary to defend Piero's inclusion in the Renaissance canon. Among those taken with the Italian master's "ineloquent art" was Henry Clay Frick's daughter, Helen. She was eager to acquire Pieros—works "unlike any other Italian art!" After much frustration, including a failed attempt to woo *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels* away from the "obstinate" Robert Sterling Clark, Helen convinced the Frick's trustees to purchase *Saint John the Evangelist* (1454–69) in 1936 for $400,000. Subsequent Piero additions to the collection came through museological horse-trading. When the opportunity arose to swap canvases by Cézanne and Gauguin for a discount on two Pieros, Helen did so swiftly. She did not share her father's love of Impressionism.

"Piero della Francesca in America" is, in part, an homage to the perspicacity of American collectors and, especially, the doggedness of Helen Clay Frick. Is it crass (or ungrateful) to observe that this aspect of the exhibition leaves a greater impression than the re-envisioning of The Sant'Agostino Altarpiece? The attempt to do so, while heroic, is inherently frustrating. A photographic montage seen on a wall label illustrates what Piero's altarpiece—or significant portions of it, anyway—might have looked like. But history is ruthless and scholarship sometimes a tease. It's a testament to the intensity of Piero's vision that the authority of this-or-that image survives the loss of a guiding context. Still and all, anyone who manages to mount the first U.S. exhibition devoted to this seminal figure deserves kudos. So give Curator Silver a hand. We are not likely to see another such exhibition on this side of the Atlantic in our lifetimes.

—Mario Naves

"Becoming Picasso: Paris 1901"
The Courtauld Gallery, London
February 14–May 26, 2013

The Courtauld Gallery is renowned for its compact, highly focused exhibitions, and "Becoming Picasso" is a very successful instance, consisting of work painted in just one year of Picasso's life: 1901, the year when he had his first major exhibition in Paris, aged only nineteen.

The first half of the Courtauld exhibition consists of the exuberant, brightly colored work that Picasso rapidly created in the spring of that year. It is said that he sometimes finished three canvasses in a day for the show in June and July organized in the gallery of the leading Paris art dealer, Ambroise Vollard. The latter part of the Courtauld exhibition consists of the very different, melancholy work he produced later in 1901, when he was depressed at the suicide in Paris of his close friend from Barcelona, the Catalan aesthete Carlos Casagemas. It was the beginning of Picasso's Blue Period when this dominant preferred color reflected his disenchanted mood.

The contrast can well be seen in his two self-portraits from earlier and later in the year, both on display at the Courtauld. In the Vollard show, he was *Yo Picasso*—I Picasso—a pushy, confident, self-declamatory egoist, come bursting forth to capture and captivate Paris. His orange cravat, a shirt of brilliant whiteness, the vivid blur of the palette in his hand and the streaked dark background between them hold a very Spanish, olive-colored face with jet black hair and eyes. He looks out boldly, if not entirely directly. In the *Self-portrait (Yo)* produced later that year, his haunted, unsettling, introspective face fills the frame. He is still *Yo*, I, but the face says "me."

That spring, he had produced perhaps as many as sixty-five paintings for Vollard, working energetically, almost crazily, locking himself up in his studio in Montmartre, but also chasing round the delights of Paris to be painted—the Moulin Rouge, the ballet, the can-can, and the circus. His audience were to be Parisians and he wanted to give them Paris. These works demonstrate his very thorough knowledge of earlier painters who had used bright colors—Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Gauguin. He had understood their art but was now taking it in new and unexpected directions. In his *Dwarf Dancer (Nana)*, from a circus cabaret, he has turned Degas's statue *La Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans (Little Dancer, Fourteen Years Old)* (1881) into Velásquez's court dwarf from *Las Meninas* (*The Maids of Honor*) (1656), blending two artists to whom he was devoted. Picasso's *At the Moulin Rouge* contrasts a woman on the balcony dominating the left foreground with the froth of dancers' petticoats below, set against a red stage. It reminds one of Manet but also of Sickert, though, more to the point, both Picasso and Sickert were independently influenced by Degas.

The Paris exhibition was in all senses a success, but Picasso soon, perhaps immediately, turned away from its themes and colors. *Casagemas in his Coffin* has a peaceful face, seen from the side, drawn from memory and earlier sketches of his friend and shown without the disfiguring bullet hole in his temple seen in Picasso's other versions. It is a Blue Period elegy whose melancholy colors range from dark green to a hint of yellow. The same coloring characterizes *Evocation, the Funeral of Casagemas*, where the dead man is laid out on his shroud next to a tomb, surrounded by mourners in deep blue. Above them is another Casagemas, ascending on a white stallion into the clouds of heaven to be greeted by a naked prostitute, her back to us, who embraces him and conceals him from us. All we can see are his arms extended as if he were on a cross. Close by are other women of that profession, some naked, some clad only in stockings, and a grieving woman in a blue robe with her children. It has been called "a secular altar piece," and its style has been compared with El Greco.

The severely depressed Picasso now took to painting in austere colors the failures and outcasts of his society—prostitutes, beggars, drunks—and even sought them out, visiting the women's prison of Saint-Lazare. He was to produce a series of paintings of absinthe drinkers, that image of sodden dumb addiction, despair, and personal collapse used earlier

by other French artists, such as Manet and Degas. Many of the young Casagemas's problems had stemmed from his dependence on alcohol. In Picasso's *Absinthe Drinker* shown at the Courtauld, the drinker, a woman with very long hands and arms, is trapped by a circular table on which there is a huge blue siphon next to a glass of *la fée verte*, the green fairy, absinthe; it boxes her into the corner between two walls. She literally has no room to move and her hard, bleak, almost Aztec face dominates the picture. The perfectly proportioned and very large blue siphon emphasizes the elongated arms of the woman whose blue dress it matches.

The exhibition's conventional portrayal of Picasso's sudden switch from euphoria to melancholy is rather contradicted by actual history. Casagemas had become infatuated with the voluptuous and promiscuous laundress and artists' model Germaine Gargallo but had never got beyond mild petting—something unusual in Bohemian Montmartre. He proposed to her, but, according to Manuel Mateo Perez, she rejected him with vicious ridicule taunting him with his impotence and calling him a "faggot." (Perez uses the Spanish term *maricón*, she may have used the equally pejorative French *pédale.*) Casagemas, who was not just a disappointed suitor but also in despair at his sense of failure and angered by her offensive insults, gave a dinner at L'Hippodrome in Paris. There, he called the company to order, rose to his feet, spoke in French, pulled out a revolver, tried to shoot Germaine, missed, and then turned the gun on himself.

Picasso learned of Casagemas's death in February, when he was in Madrid and his response, which he expressed in angry blue and violet sketches of imps, was to want revenge. On his return to Paris, Perez says Picasso took Germaine to his study, ordered her to undress, had sex with her, telling her to look him in the eyes throughout, and then threw her out saying, "I never want to see you again," the same phrase with which she had finally rejected Casagemas. If Perez's account is true, then the energy Picasso threw into the paintings for Vollard was as much fuelled by fury and a wish to succeed in the city where his friend had failed as it was by pride and ambition. Hence the sudden collapse of mood and change of style when he had succeeded and his anger was spent. It means also that we should look again at the whores in heaven waiting for Casagemas. They are not, as has been suggested, the sad infected drabs of the Saint-Lazare, but the sexual rewards he had never enjoyed during his brief life. The children are the ones Casagemas never had.

Picasso did see Germaine again, for she appears in the Courtauld exhibition as Columbine in his *Harlequin and Columbine*, where the couple sit glumly facing apart in a bar drinking absinthe. Soon after Casegemas's suicide, Germaine married another close friend of Picasso's from Spain—Ramon Pichot Gironès—and she, Casagemas, and Pichot turn up in Picasso's later paintings, sometimes together in a sexualized dance of death. The entire tangled story of this *femme fatale* also provides a curious take on some of Picasso's stranger, darker, often violent portrayals of sexuality and mortality later in his career.

An important exhibition about an important year in the life of an important artist.

—*Christie Davies*

Editors' note: We'd like to remind our readers that all of our art coverage is accompanied by images online at www.newcriterion.com.

Gallery chronicle
by James Panero

Late into dinner with some art teachers a few weeks back, I impressed on them the urgency of what they do. Our conversation passed at a Twitteresque 140-character rate through much of what I've been thinking about recently, from the history of the Internet to the independent networks of New York's outer-borough art scene. We talked about walking across the barren landscape of Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, that pile of sand that might one day be a strip of museum franchises, and discussed the potential of massive open online courses—better known as MOOCs—to alter the landscape of education. One of the teachers described his interest in the microscopic views offered by the "gigapixel" images on Google Art Project and what it means to see in this new and unintended way.

What keeps coming up for me is how quickly our landscape is shifting and what a challenge it is to keep up. The only certainty of the next few decades is that they will be nothing like the previous ones. As I leveled with the teachers at the end of our evening, it falls to their students to make sense of it all. Maybe it sounded a bit much, but I meant it. Artists have a power to illuminate what otherwise can't be seen.

Since I started following his work several years ago, Thornton Willis is an artist who has opened my eyes to the continued possibilities of paint as a means of illustrating the invisible. As an abstract painter, he is about as concrete as it gets. His simple designs of elemental shapes and bold colors become groundbreaking explorations, especially for the many artists who admire him. Willis is a painter's painter, and if more people were to value visionaries over noisemakers, he certainly would be a household name. Until then, we should consider ourselves fortunate, because at least we can know his work.

Willis's latest exhibition at Elizabeth Harris Gallery may be his most focused to date.[1] The son of an itinerant minister from the Deep South, Willis has followed his own artistic calling since first arriving in SoHo in the 1960s. His paintings combine geometry and an instinct to look closely at the particles of paint. Now in his current show, his large compositions have reached a new order of magnification, with shapes that are sharper and bolder than ever before. Willis is an artist who has long evinced an interest in physics and scientific research. These latest paintings are like his own Higgs boson breakthrough, revealing for the first time new building blocks of elementary forms.

Willis breaks his shapes apart into free-floating zags and els. Drawing on his canvases from the 1970s, he creates an ambiguity between figure and ground, often by layering high-key complementary colors that give his paintings a radiant energy. *The Ceremony* (2013) resembles red lightning stepped across a black ground. The pencil marks inside also dematerialize the red forms, pulling the thick black forward.

Willis brings a master's hand to paint on canvas. He first maps out his shapes in thin acrylics. He then fills in with his own blend of

1 "Thornton Willis: Steps" opened at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, on March 14 and remains on view through April 13, 2013.

oil and medium. This extra layer adds a shimmer to the forms and often leaves traces of his brushstrokes in the paint that seem wet and fresh but never greasy.

The latest show also includes wall assemblages made of layered strips of painted wood. After seeing these tough little sculptures in the studio, I am glad Willis decided to display them in the show. They bring his structures into even greater relief. Here Willis has taken his painterly analysis and synthesized it—abstract vision made real.

When it was revealed last year that John Elderfield would become a consultant to Gagosian, many speculated about the big fish this former chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art would pull in for the mega-dealer. The biggest so far has been Helen Frankenthaler, the great abstractionist who died in late 2011. Elderfield's first Frankenthaler show is now up in Gagosian's soaring Chelsea gallery.

"Painted on 21st Street: Helen Frankenthaler from 1950 to 1959" looks at the thrilling first decade of this artist's career after she graduated from Bennington College, landed in the center of the New York School, and became a leader of its younger generation.[2] This period includes the development of her "soak-stain" technique of applying thin oil onto unprimed canvas and the most famous painting of her career, *Mountains and Sea* (1952).

Much has been made of the influence of this one painting, which is the center of the Gagosian show (so associated with the National Gallery of Art, this painting in fact is on extended loan to the institution from the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation). After seeing it in her studio in 1953, Morris Louis called *Mountains and Sea* "a bridge between Pollock and what was possible." His visit directly informed what became known as Color Field abstraction in the 1960s.

Cutting against this influence, Elderfield says one purpose of the Gagosian show is to "de-emphasize the bridge, and to defend Frankenthaler's art of the 1950s as its own destination."

Of course, Elderfield wants to show the influence of the soak-stain on Frankenthaler's own work. Breaking up the exhibition into two large rooms that roughly divide the decade in half, he singles out the staining years of 1956–1960 as the "four-year sequence of abstract/figurative compositions that constitutes her greatest run of paintings of that decade."

I left with a different thought. One revelation of this show is how experimental and vocal Frankenthaler's work was in the early part of the decade. "There are no flat rules for getting at the workings of a painting," she wrote in her journal in the spring of 1950, "but I feel more than ever that the secrets lie in ambiguity: ambiguity that makes a complete final statement in the painting whole."

Painted on 21st Street (1950), a primed canvas of oil, sand, plaster, and coffee grounds, is a work of swirls and spills that feels like it literally came off the pavement of 21st Street. So too *The Jugglers* (1951), a flurry of color and forms that was "street art" before there was such a thing. Then there is *Ed Winston's Tropical Gardens* (1951), a long mural named after a popular nightclub that shows off Frankenthaler's great smile along with her skill. Against these paintings, *Mountains and Sea* appears not as the perfection of a formal technique but rather as part of a fast and innovative cycle of production. Its freshness is why it still stands out as her best painting of the decade.

By the second part of the decade, just as the stain allowed her pigments to soak into the canvas, so too did Frankenthaler's voice get subsumed in the work. In the 1960s this fact revealed itself in brilliant canvases that wholly speak for themselves. In the late 1950s, at Gagosian at least, that voice often comes across as trapped halfway between the artist and the canvas soaking it in.

The Times Square Gallery of Hunter College occupies the first floor of a doomed loft building in the chthonic depths of midtown. A final exhibition before the building is demolished reminds us why we'll miss it. Sanford Wurmfeld was the Hunter professor most involved in creating this labyrinthine exhibition hall. It's only appropriate that the final show is dedicated to him. Organized by William C. Agee and five

2 "Painted on 21st Street: Helen Frankenthaler from 1950 to 1959" opened at Gagosian Gallery, New York, on March 8 and remains on view through April 13, 2013.

students from the MA and MFA programs at Hunter, "Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966–2013" will certainly be the last to reveal in all its size and fullness the legacy of color painting that was once at the heart of this program.[3]

"Color Visions" shows Wurmfeld to be far more than an optical painter, however much his rainbow gingham patterns might exercise the optic nerve. The standouts are those works that depart from the flat canvas. His colored columns from the late 1960s are mesmerizing crystals that bend in light. His "walk through" sculpture of translucent acrylic sheets from 1970 comes with its own warning—"sculpture may cause disorientation"—that should be taken seriously for the way its colored panels react when viewed together. Near the end of the show, Wurmfeld's small watercolors of triangles and squares are intimate handmade gestures referencing early color-theory illustrations. Then there is the model of his "Cyclorama," from 2009, a walk-in space that takes the nineteenth-century panorama into the twenty-first and the age of pure color.

Two exhibitions on the Lower East Side show this alternative arts neighborhood at its best. For "May I Draw," Judith Braun calls herself a "quantum amplifier" and limits her drawings with three requirements: "symmetry, abstraction, and carbon medium."[4] The results are swirling mandalas and radiant waves of graphite on paper. By imposing limitations, artists focus their work. With a visual mind and a steady hand, Braun best channels her results in the denser, blocked-in drawings with black backgrounds. She also captures the organic nature of symmetry in pointillist, spherical shapes that resemble luminescent deep-sea creatures. In a few examples, the exhibition hints at Braun's most recent rule—to draw entirely with her fingers. Last year at the Chrysler Museum of Art in Virginia, Braun created a mural landscape of fingerprints that brought to mind the animism of Charles Burchfield and revealed the flowering energy grounding all of her work.

Paul D'Agostino is the Renaissance Man of Bushwick. Since 2008 he has run Centotto, one of the neighborhood's more unusual galleries, out of his apartment. A Professor of Italian at Brooklyn College, D'Agostino is a translator of both language and art. For "Twilit Ensembles" at Pocket Utopia, D'Agostino creates "floor translations" by recasting paint stains found in his studio into fanciful narratives of graphite on paper and sculptures.[5] D'Agostino's strength is a conceptual one. Compared to the earlier work in the exhibition—which packs too much in a tiny space—this latest series shows the humorous side of D'Agostino's mind. I was not entirely taken by the execution of the drawings, which seemed unnecessarily crude, but I like the way his work is unfolding.

Joe Zucker is the thinking-man's painter, or perhaps the painting-man's thinker. For "Empire Descending a Staircase," his latest exhibition at Mary Boone, Zucker's vision combines the appearance of antique iconography with mosaic tilework, all created out of watercolor applied to carved gypsum board.[6]

This is the second show at Boone to display Zucker's labor-intensive technique, in which he hand-scores gypsum drywall into a grid, peels off the paper front, and colors the squares of powdery gypsum one by one. This time the images are flatter and almost entirely monochromatic, with less illusion of depth, and they work even better than before. The images of shaking columns now seem to speak less to a ruined scene and more to a ruined vision. The exhibition includes both square and tall, narrow works that are themselves columns seeming to hold up the gallery space. Whether he's depicting shaking ground or altered vision, Zucker sees ahead by looking back, or maybe the other way around.

3 "Sanford Wurmfeld: Color Visions 1966–2013" opened at the Hunter College/Times Square Gallery, New York, on February 15 and remains on view through April 20, 2013.

4 "Judith Braun: May I Draw" opened at Joe Sheftel Gallery, New York, on March 3 and remains on view through April 21, 2013.

5 "Paul D'Agostino: Twilit Ensembles" opened at Pocket Utopia, New York, on March 3 and remains on view through April 21, 2013.

6 "Joe Zucker: Empire Descending a Staircase" opened at Mary Boone Gallery, New York, on March 1 and remains on view through April 27, 2013.

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

The Brentano String Quartet began its concert in Zankel Hall with a joke—with Haydn's String Quartet in E flat, Op. 33, No. 2, nicknamed "Joke." This is because the composer teases the audience with several false endings. The glory of this work, I think, is the slow movement, marked Largo e sostenuto. It is beautiful, and our ensemble played it that way, with the four lines lovingly knitted together. The joking at the end was well-timed, though I found it a little sober. The audience disagreed, apparently, as they virtually exploded in mirth and appreciation.

So, the concert had begun nicely, but its momentum was quickly stopped when a composer came out onstage to talk. He said he liked an audience to meet him, to see what a "playful, mischievous spirit" he is. He discussed the piece of his about to be played, repeating what was in our program notes. I believe he talked for about ten minutes. I sort of forgot we were at a concert, and that we had heard a Haydn string quartet. The world is full of yak-yak; concerts used to be a refuge from it. Now musicians insist on talking, though music can talk just as well, or better.

The composer was Steven Mackey, an American born in 1956. His piece was *One Red Rose*, commissioned by three organizations, including Carnegie Hall, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Kennedy assassination. "In the most abstract terms," says Mackey in his program notes, "this piece explores the dialectic between the personal and the public." There was a difference between Mrs. Kennedy's public composure, as she went about her remaining duties, and the agony within. The piece is called *One Red Rose* because a Secret Service agent found such a flower, blood-soaked, in the limo. It had come from a bouquet given to the First Lady.

Mackey's work is in three movements, each with two sections or more. The work begins simple and pop-like, except for the dissonances. It is by turns menacing, playful, sweetly rocking. The players slap at their instruments in distress. There is angry, emotional sawing. The work ends with some power—that is, some musical inspiration—and this power is of an affirmative nature. You might even say the ending is happy. I could see what the composer means by a "dialectic between the personal and the public." Yet a work without words means nothing, even if it means very specific things in a composer's head, or a listener's. A composer can get specific with something like "Happy Birthday," however, or a national anthem—and Mackey indeed includes a snatch of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

I have been churlish about this composer's talking—as about all musicians' talking—and I was not taken with his piece on first hearing. But Mackey seems like a swell guy—he looks like a rocker—and he is no doubt sincere. *One Red Rose* seems to mean a lot to him. And the audience gave it a standing ovation.

The next night, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam arrived at Carnegie Hall for two concerts. They were

led by their chief conductor, the excellent Mariss Jansons. Their first concert had a soloist, Leonidas Kavakos, also excellent. He is a violinist (as well as a conductor). And he too looks like a rocker, with shoulder-length hair. His concerto was the Bartók Second. This is a quite difficult work, but Kavakos played it as though he had not a care in the world. Everything was easy for him. Plus, everything was beautiful—Romantic, warm, lush. Seldom will you hear Bartók more beautiful (and we tend to think of him as a cerebral modernist). I have heard Kavakos play many times, and he has always been good—usually very good—but I had never had the thought, "He's a great violinist." I did on this night.

After intermission, Jansons led the Concertgebouw in Mahler's First Symphony ("Titan"). Needless to say, it was ably conducted and well executed. I must say, however, that it did not move, thrill, or throttle me, as this music can and should. But it did others, as evidenced by their long, tumultuous applause. Seeing as I'm talking about the audience, let me say that some members applauded between movements, both of the concerto and of the symphony. This was not especially annoying. The shushing of them by others—harsh, petty, self-righteous shushing—was.

The Concertgebouw began its second concert with a Strauss tone poem, *Death and Transfiguration*. Ideally, this work will end a program, for obvious reasons—but people often place it elsewhere. Jansons shaped it nicely, and the orchestra played it beautifully. As before, this is needless to say. But the big question is, "Was the work transcendental?" To me, it was not. The following work was. This was Bruckner's Symphony No. 7, and Jansons had his forces clicking in it. The music was logical, inexorable, and sublime. It had its healing properties. In my view, the Finale was a touch fast—Bruckner warns "nicht schnell"—but Jansons was within reason, and he showed himself to be what I have often described him as: "great-souled." I suppose that makes him a mahatma. (Bruckner too.)

When the Amsterdammers cleared out, some Stockholmers came in—the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra. They were conducted by their chief, Sakari Oramo. As he says, he is not Japanese, no matter what his name sounds like: He's a Finn. And he is one of the best young conductors in the world. I have said this for years, and I now see he's in his mid-forties. It is time, I suppose, to drop the "young"; he is still one of the best. At Carnegie Hall, he put on a variety show: a modern piece; some songs, sung by a soprano; a popular Romantic violin concerto; and a Sibelius symphony.

The OOMP—that is to say, the Obligatory Opening Modern Piece—was a piece designed to be an OOMP. According to our program notes, "*Open Mind* is an introductory piece, an overture for orchestra. The title refers to the fact that the work is meant to be a short opening piece in a concert program . . ." I, for one, was delighted by this explicitness. *Open Mind* is by Rolf Martinsson, a Swedish composer born in 1956, the same year as Steven Mackey. OOMP or not, this piece is worthy and beautiful. It begins exuberant and then becomes tingly. It is Disneyesque in quality. Then there is calm, as in a slow movement. The brass get a little jazzy, and a little bluesy. The exuberance returns, and the piece ends with fairy dust. Contemporary composers like to do this: sprinkle fairy dust on their music, via bells and so on. Oramo conducted his Martinsson with superb attention and control.

As for the songs, they were by Grieg and Stenhammar, and they were sung by Elin Rombo, another Swede. She sang them correctly and, above all, lovingly. She did no straining whatsoever: She went up for her high notes as a violinist would, not as a singer so often does, tightly and riskily. Throughout the songs, she was a model of poise and elasticity.

The violin concerto was the Bruch (the G-minor, of course), and it was played by Ray Chen, a hotshot born in Taiwan, reared in Australia, and trained here in America. He made too small a sound in the beginning, and his intonation was shaky. But he soon

settled down, playing the first movement with interpretive daring, though not with interpretive arrogance or nonsense. In the Adagio, he was nicely tender. Oramo began the Finale with wonderful, shivering anticipation. In this movement, Chen again suffered some poor intonation, but his spirit was right, and the music was fast and happy in his hands. He seemed pleased to be playing the Bruch—and that counts for a lot. If you consider it a schlocky embarrassment, you do neither it nor yourself any good.

That Sibelius symphony was the Second, in D major. I could give you a blow-by-blow, but the bottom line is this: Oramo was masterly. His musicianship was well-nigh impeccable. I have long thought he should have a bigger career, a bigger podium. There are pipsqueaks on some of our major podiums, and this guy's in Stockholm? But maybe he thinks he's doing great, and maybe Stockholm does too—and maybe he is.

In my November chronicle, I wrote about a *Carmen* at the Metropolitan Opera. A performance months later offered some new cast members, prominently the tenor singing Don José. He is Nikolai Schukoff, an Austrian, not to be confused with Neil Shicoff, the veteran American tenor. On the night I heard him, Schukoff was rough-and-ready. But he was not without nuance. On at least one high note, Schukoff sang what I'm fairly sure was a falsetto, and it was quite pretty. At the end of the Flower Song, he sang a genuine *piano*, on that high B flat. It was not pretty, but it was there, and genuine. I would like to make a complaint about the beginning of the aria: Schukoff started singing the first letter, the "L" in "La," about an hour before it was time. This sort of telegraphing is common, and baneful.

A word about Dwayne Croft, too, please: The veteran baritone was Escamillo, and he was very satisfying. The part seemed a bit low for him, but he sang with aliveness and potency—an unforced potency. And then there was his beautiful voice, of course. So versatile, so dependable, and so unhyped is this singer, you can take him for granted. That is unfortunate.

I noticed something when the King's Singers took the stage of Zankel Hall. David Hurley, the countertenor, is one of the oldest. Two seconds ago, he was the youngest one—taking over from a singer named Jeremy Jackman. Actually, it was in 1990. Hurley writes in his bio, "It seems incredible to me that I have been a member of The King's Singers for twenty-two years. I don't know where the time has gone." Members of the group come and go, but the group, the brand, remains, decade after decade.

On this night, they sang an appealing mixture of music, covering almost five centuries. One item was a relatively new piece, composed by Joby Talbot, a Briton born in 1971. This is not a "British" piece, however: Called "León," and pulled from a larger work called *Path of Miracles*, it is about the Camino Francés, the famous pilgrimage over the Pyrenees. Talbot describes "León" as a "Lux aeterna." It is in C minor, and minimalistic, and it is supposed to be mesmerizing, I think. To a degree, it is. It is certainly very pretty and sincere. Somehow, it ends in a heavenly D major.

And how did the King's Singers sing? I was able to hear only the first half of their program, but, in this half, they did not sing like themselves: They were dry in sound, uncertain of pitch, and unmeshing. This is not the King's Singers. The magic was not there. I like to think it returned after I had gone.

The Met staged *Parsifal*, and there was applause at the beginning. I mention this because sometimes the conductor simply appears, to begin this opera. He has crept into the pit under cover of darkness. In the stillness, he begins this semi-sacred work. I like it this way. The Met's conductor on this occasion, Daniele Gatti, did it another way. He had a very good night, although Act I was questionable. Gatti conducted a little too carefully, a little preciously. Notes were placed, rather as knives, forks, and spoons are placed. They did not unfold naturally, without fuss or ceremony. But Act II was superb. (This act has more blood and less ethereality.) So was Act III, in which we entered "Wagner time," that state of mind from which normal, human time is absent. The

orchestra played extremely well, with the woodwind section shining.

It is hard to see how a cast of *Parsifal* today could be better than the one the Met assembled. This is a man-heavy opera—almost as man-heavy as *Billy Budd*—and the men of the Met Chorus did themselves proud. They made themselves heard, virilely, but never bellowed. *Parsifal* is not just a festival of men's voices but a festival of low voices. In the roles of Gurnemanz, Amfortas, and Klingsor, the Met had René Pape, Peter Mattei, and Evgeny Nikitin. The tenor, who has the title role, was Jonas Kaufmann. He sang beautifully and intelligently, though his voice may be a little small for the part. The notes Wagner assigns his middle voice were hard on him. And though he has a beautiful instrument, that instrument is a little contained. Kaufmann reminds me of a trumpeter—a splendid trumpeter—who has inadvertently left his mute in.

There is a woman in this opera, and she is Kundry. Taking this part was Katarina Dalayman, the Swedish soprano. What I said about Leonidas Kavakos, above, I will say about Dalayman: She has always been good, usually very good. But since hearing her Brünnhilde last season and her Kundry this season, I believe she is actually great.

The Met's production was a new one, made by François Girard, the Canadian director. I did not particularly understand the first act. The men were in white dress shirts, and they held chairs upside down, and they engaged in those odd, synchronized hand movements popular with directors today. Women in black dresses stood to one side with their backs turned. I had no doubt that all this made perfect sense to Girard, and to all those who had heard his explanations. But the rest of us? Act II was fascinating to look at and congruent with the opera. As for Act III, I did not understand why it had to be so ugly—given the rejuvenation that Wagner writes. But Girard is a man to be taken seriously. And, throughout the opera, there was an interesting shifting sky.

The New York Philharmonic had an OOMP, but not really, because this work was a little long for an OOMP—almost twenty minutes. It was *Phantasmata*, a triptych written by Christopher Rouse in the 1980s. (Rouse is an American born in 1949.) The title, he explains in program notes, "comes from the writings of the great physician and occultist Paracelsus, who refers to *phantasmata* as 'hallucinations created by thought.'" The first movement is an "evestrum." And an evestrum is "Paracelsus's name for the astral body." There is something 1980s about this work, something Shirley MacLaine. The second movement employs crystal goblets. My language has a mocking tone, I know, but listen: This 1980s stuff—and the Paracelsian stuff—is rich material for music. That second movement is called "The Infernal Machine." The third is "Bump," a "nightmare conga," says Rouse, or "a gala Boston Pops performance in Hell." Rouse is an excellent writer about music, an awkward subject to write about.

His evestrum is nicely, quietly trippy. "The Infernal Machine" is appropriately exciting and busy—very busy, like a million modern pieces (but more exciting). "Bump" is noisy and amazing. But, as with heavy metal, the shock wears off, and it becomes maybe a little dull. Rouse milks the madness for a long time. But I enjoyed hearing *Phantasmata*, and I enjoy that Rouse enjoys music. He composes like a man who likes music. "What a dumb thing to say!" you might protest. "Don't they all?" No, actually, not really. Alan Gilbert did the conducting, and I will say about him what I said about Sakari Oramo, with his Rolf Martinsson piece: He conducted with superb attention and control.

That night—the Philharmonic concert was in the morning—the Philadelphia Orchestra played in Carnegie Hall. Their OOMP was by Gabriela Lena Frank, a Berkeley-born composer in her early forties. Her piece is *Concertino Cusqueño*, that second word referring to Cusco, the city in Peru. Our program notes told us the following about the piece: "Frank imaginatively blends her South American heritage with a love for the music of the twentieth-century English composer Benjamin Britten." We were also told that "Frank possesses a unique ability to capture sound in its original environment"—unique? She herself was quoted as saying, "I've

long been fascinated by my multicultural heritage." That is a statement perfectly emblematic of the modern American.

Concertino Cusqueño is, among other things, an example of musical tourism. Famous examples include *El Salón México* and the *Cuban Overture* (Copland and Gershwin). Frank has composers in addition to Britten lurking in her concertino, I think: I believe I heard the ascending bells that conclude the first movement of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony. I will say this for the piece, something I have said of other pieces discussed in this chronicle: It is sincere. You and I could mock it, but Frank is the one who had the nerve and, yes, ability to put pen to manuscript paper—or whatever they're composing on these days—and she has composed sincerely. May she prosper.

In opera, there is such a thing as luxury casting: putting a first-rate singer in a minor role. In song recitals, there must be such a thing as luxury accompanying: having a starry concert pianist at the keyboard. Magdalena Kožená sang a recital in Carnegie Hall in the company of Yefim Bronfman. In Salzburg a few summers ago, she sang a recital with Mitsuko Uchida. Jean-Yves Thibaudet is another pianist who likes to accompany singers: Renée Fleming, for example, and Angelika Kirchschlager.

Kožená and Bronfman complemented each other splendidly. Each is intelligent, musical, versatile, and experienced. Each displayed what you might call "seriousness of purpose." They were not grim or overly earnest. They simply adhered to a high standard. Sitting in the audience, you never had a technical worry about either one of them. You had scarcely an interpretive worry either. These were two of the best, collaborating harmoniously (by all evidence).

Among songs and cycles by Mussorgsky, Ravel, Rachmaninoff, and Bartók, there was a set by Marc-André Dalbavie, a Frenchman born in 1961. This set is *Three Melodies on a Poem of Ezra Pound*. The first "melody" starts out, in the piano, like an off-key "Summertime." (Maybe only an American would notice this.) The second is fast and Debussyan. All three are sensitive and intimate, the products of a refined sensibility. Dalbavie has an ear for song, which is to say, for matching syllable and note, thought and note, etc.

Let me record that Kožená did not sing a note off-key all night long. She was an intonation machine. This is not the be-all, end-all in singing—plenty of singers give pleasure while missing the center of the note. But if you can be in the center, all the better. As for the Kožená-Bronfman collaboration, I wish it could be represented on an album, or three.

About a week later, the Vienna Philharmonic began a stand at Carnegie Hall. They were conducted by their countryman Franz Welser-Möst (whose big job in America is in Cleveland). At the beginning of their first concert, they did something only the VPO would do, I think: They played the *Poet and Peasant* Overture. It takes supreme self-confidence to program this piece—a self-confidence that excludes worry about fashion. Franz von Suppé's gift to posterity is very old-fashioned. It is also marvelous. Welser-Möst and the VPO botched the entrance—the opening chord—but all was well thereafter. They are an elegant machine, the VPO.

A veteran Strauss tenor, Herbert Lippert, came out to sing Strauss songs. Tenors sometimes do this, with orchestra. Peter Anders did so with Furtwängler. Lippert was effortful, but he was game.

The concert closed with Dvořák's Symphony No. 7, which gave me a memory—another memory from Salzburg. In 2008, Welser-Möst came with his Cleveland Orchestra, and they were in the pit for Dvořák's opera *Rusalka*. This did not sit well with the resident orchestra, the VPO. One of them was quoted as grumbling, "We have more Czech grandmothers in our orchestra than they do in theirs." He meant there were more grandsons of Czechs in the Viennese orchestra than in Cleveland's. The Americans said, "Don't be so sure." In any case, the VPO was good in Dvořák's Seventh, and Welser-Möst was good too. Perfectly competent. The music can do more for you, however—certainly for me.

The media

Oh, the irony!

by James Bowman

There is a great movie moment in Carol Reed's *Night Train to Munich* of 1940, a tale of Germany at the onset of the Second World War and the attempt by a dashing secret agent, played by Rex Harrison as a sort of James Bond *avant la lettre*, to spirit out of the country a Czech professor with vital information about a new armor-plating technology—and his beautiful daughter—after they have been kidnapped by Nazis. At one point, a Nazi guard is interrogating a lowly clerk. "It's been reported to me that you've been heard expressing sentiments hostile to the fatherland," says the guard. "I warn you, Schwab, this treasonable conduct will lead you to a concentration camp."

"But, sir," says the clerk. "What did I say?"

"You were distinctly heard to remark, 'This is a fine country to live in.'"

"Oh, no sir," says the clerk, sounding relieved. "There's some mistake. I said, 'This is a *fine* country to live in.'"

The guard is taken aback. "Are you sure?" he asks.

"Yes, sir," answers the clerk.

"I see. Well, in future, don't make remarks that can be taken in two ways."

It's almost a truism, at least in English-speaking countries, that totalitarians and other tyrants lack a sense of humor. Also, that bullies are generally too stupid to understand irony. In this case, however, it's just because the bully *does* understand irony—at least to the extent that he knows it consists of "remarks that can be taken in two ways"—that he is made to look an idiot: first, because every remark can be taken in (at least) two ways, depending on the context, and, second, because he allows a weaker person to take advantage of his social insecurity to turn the tables on him. For the guard knows his disadvantage *vis à vis* his victim is that the latter understands the context of his remark while he does not. If others understand it too, he will appear a fool in their eyes for taking it the wrong way, so he allows himself to be led back to a benign interpretation of words that were not intended benignly.

The episode is a perfect illustration of Czesław Miłosz's dictum that irony is "the glory of slaves," and a revenge of the powerless upon the powerful. But this revenge depends on something like that guard's insecurity. The powerful have to care how they appear in the eyes of those they exercise power over—something that doesn't happen in real life quite so often as it does in the movies. Speaking of Nazis and trains, for example, in John Frankenheimer's *The Train* of 1964, Burt Lancaster is hiding out in the wine cellar of the station hotel when the Nazis come calling in search of him. As Jeanne Moreau emerges from the cellar with two bottles of wine, the Germans ask her if she has seen him. "Yes, yes, of course I have," she says, gesturing toward the open door from which she has just emerged. "I'm keeping him in the wine cellar." The Nazis turn away, leaving the cellar unsearched. Obviously, it must matter to them if this Frenchwoman thinks them too stupid to know when she is being ironic—as, ironically, she obviously does.

Irony can also be a weapon of the powerful, however. At least it can when the powerful are blessed, as President Obama is, with a certain prestige to go with their power. Take the e-mailed warning by the presidential adviser Gene Sperling to Bob Woodward that he was going to "regret" having written in *The Washington Post* that the President had been less than entirely truthful in claiming that the idea for the "sequester"—I use the now-universal journalistic shorthand for a sequestration of funds as mandated in last summer's deal between the White House and the Republicans over the budget ceiling—had not come from the White House. Commendably, in my view, Mr. Woodward had not accused Mr. Obama of lying, but he had included this statement as an example of "misunderstanding, misstatement, and all the classic contortions of partisan message management." This was presumably taken by Mr. Sperling, as it was by many of the President's conservative detractors, as tantamount to a charge of lying, and he admitted to having raised his voice in a telephone conversation with Mr. Woodward before sending the e-mail mentioned earlier.

This, for some reason, Mr. Woodward took to *Politico*, which then reported that he had repeated to its reporters—who happened to be his former *Post* colleagues Mike Allen and Jim VandeHei—the e-mail's relevant sentence: "I think you will regret staking out that claim."

> "'You'll regret'? Come on," [Woodward] said. "I think if Obama himself saw the way they're dealing with some of this, he would say, 'Whoa, we don't tell any reporter 'you're going to regret challenging us.'"
>
> "They have to be willing to live in the world where they're challenged," Woodward continued in his calm, instantly recognizable voice. "I've tangled with lots of these people. But suppose there's a young reporter who's only had a couple of years'—or 10 years'—experience and the White House is sending him an e-mail saying, 'You're going to regret this.' You know, tremble, tremble. I don't think it's the way to operate."

I quote so much of the context just so as to make it clear why Messrs. Allen and VandeHei claimed that Mr. Woodward had been "making clear he saw it as a veiled threat." I think that any reasonable person would have taken the same view. Yet Mr. Woodward instantly engaged in a bit of "message management" of his own, denying that he had claimed to have been threatened and insisting that it was *Politico*'s misunderstanding and misstatement to have written otherwise. As he told his current *Post* colleague, Paul Farhi,

> he stands by the idea that Sperling's language was over the line but stops short of suggesting outright intimidation. "I never characterized it as a 'threat,'" he said. "I think that was *Politico*'s word. I said I think [Sperling's] language is unfortunate, and I don't think it's the way to operate. . . . [Sperling's] language speaks for itself. I don't think that's the way to operate."

Oh, the irony! He criticizes the President for denying that he had said what he clearly *had* said and, in the course of further denials, the President induces him to say something, equally clearly, that he subsequently finds it convenient to deny having said. Could it be only coincidental that the President's initial misstatement—in one of his debates with Mitt Romney last October—was forgotten in all the journalistic fuss over who had reported whom correctly? Certainly, it was far from being the first time that the media had turned a political story into a story about the media.

Of course, in subtly suggesting that Mr. Sperling's e-mail had contained a "veiled threat," Mr. Woodward had himself been guilty of (at the least) a misinterpretation, or so it seemed to most people when, subsequently, *Politico* published the entire e-mail. It begins with Mr. Sperling's apology for raising his voice in the earlier telephone conversation and an acknowledgment that "perhaps we will just not see eye to eye here." Then he goes on:

> But I do truly believe you should rethink your comment about saying that POTUS asking for revenues is moving the goal post. I know you may not believe this, but as a friend, I think you will regret staking out that claim. The idea that the sequester was to force both sides to go back

> to try at a big or grand bargain with a mix of entitlements and revenues (even if there were serious disagreements on composition) was part of the DNA of the thing from the start. It was an accepted part of the understanding—from the start. Really. It was assumed by the Rs on the Supercommittee that came right after: it was assumed in the November-December 2012 negotiations. There may have been big disagreements over rates and ratios—but that it was supposed to be replaced by entitlements and revenues of some form is not controversial.

That this is *not* a threat is just about as clear as Mr. Woodward's later claim to *Politico*—still later, denied by him—that it is. As in the case of Herr Schwab, the meaning is unambiguous in context but, taken out of context, is open to ironic re-interpretation to suit the speaker's purposes. Mr. Woodward, we may remember, is a man so confident of his ability accurately to transcribe the meanings of his interviewees that he does not scruple to put their words in quotation marks even when it is clear—as clear as Mr Sperling's non-threatening e-mail—that he has not been in a position to record or write down their exact words. As Gregg Easterbrook wrote in 2004, "Woodward and his editors have cheapened the quotation mark, changing its meaning from 'what was said' to 'whatever sounds about right.'"

That was written about his book *Plan of Attack*, which purported to describe the origins of the Iraq War and about which I wrote in this space at the time (see "Not Made Up but Unmade" in *The New Criterion* of June, 2004). On that occasion, it struck me that the Great Reporter, Bob Woodward, was not really very interested in the Iraq War or the Bush administration as a historian would have been interested in them. Rather, he was searching through the minutiae of the White House gossip he had collected for his next Watergate—or at least for some indiscretion of office politics, some hint of hypocrisy or incompetence directed by one administration official against another, that would make a headline. The implied context was that of scandal even then, and became much more so by the time he got to *State of Denial* two years later. But this was not the classic scandal of malfeasance and cover-up. It was instead merely a media consensus that, when things went badly in Iraq, someone must be to blame—someone whom it then became the media's job to expose. Mr. Woodward, as the Great Exposer, then sought to supply, through exhaustive reporting, the odd confirmatory fact for this media-generated pseudo-scandal.

We need hardly add that the task was made easier for him by the same sort of manipulation of context that he engaged in with Gene Sperling. This made his reporting of less interest in its detail—which was typically both overwhelming in quantity and trivial in importance—than in its indication of where the consensus was at any given moment. And so it proved in February. For, implausible though the threat of Mr. Sperling's words may have been, there was instant support from other journalists and commentators—some, including Ron Fournier of *National Journal*, claiming to have been threatened themselves by the Obama White House. It quickly became apparent, however, that these people, like Bob Woodward himself, were rushing to join the consensus as it was on the point of changing. The change was symptomatic of a larger shift in public opinion as a result of the administration's attempts to oversell the looming disaster it saw as a result of the sequester.

The way the wind was blowing was made apparent by the day after the dawning of the sequester on the first of March when "Saturday Night Live," usually as reliably pro-administration as the rest of the media, ran an opening sketch ridiculing Mr. Obama's attempts to go over the heads of Congress in order to raise the alarm. Jay Pharaoh as the President greeted the audience by saying, "Now most Americans don't understand what this whole sequester means. I could explain it in financial terms or human terms. But since I really have no idea about how money works or how budgets work, I'll go with human terms instead"—the human terms consisting of a procession of those supposedly devastated by the budget cuts, including an air traffic controller who said that her radar screen now wouldn't work until she had watched a

Doritos commercial and a border agent who said he was now letting every tenth Mexican into the country unmolested.

Unlike Mr. Woodward's vicarious sense of intimidation on behalf of some anonymous "young reporter," this shift in the media world's support for Mr. Obama, short-lived though it was likely to be, really was news—if news which was slow to trickle down to most of the news media themselves. Still, only three days into the budgetary Armageddon, *The New York Times* was just going through the motions by headlining "As Automatic Budget Cuts Go Into Effect, Poor May Be Hit Particularly Hard." May be? Surely, the *Times* ought to be able to do better than that? The lead of the piece was actually an assurance that "the $85 billion in automatic cuts working their way through the federal budget *spare* many programs that aid the poorest and most vulnerable Americans" (emphasis added). So that's all right then, presumably.

The White House itself was among the first to become aware of the change in the media environment and made a rapid adjustment, as was suggested by its own sudden shift from alarmism over the sequester to insistence, as it became clear that it was actually going to happen, that most people would not feel the effects of it until much later, if at all. It was an astonishing *volte face*, though it appeared to have escaped the notice of most of the media. By the time of the dinner of the Gridiron Club just over a week later, President Obama, decked out in a white tie and an unusually jovial manner, was joking about Bob Woodward and the sequester with equal insouciance—and, unlike the rest of the dinner's speakers, for the record. Here's a selection from the transcript of his speech (with the "laughter" points helpfully added) which the White House made available to the media:

> We noticed that some folks couldn't make it this evening. It's been noted that Bob Woodward sends his regrets, which Gene Sperling predicted. (Laughter.) I have to admit this whole brouhaha had me a little surprised. Who knew Gene could be so intimidating? (Laughter.) Or let me phrase it differently—who knew anybody named Gene could be this intimidating? (Laughter.)
>
> Now I know that some folks think we responded to Woodward too aggressively. But hey, when has—can anybody tell me when an administration has ever regretted picking a fight with Bob Woodward? (Laughter.) What's the worst that could happen? (Laughter and applause.)
>
> But don't worry. We're all friends again in the spirit of that wonderful song. As you may have heard, Bob invited Gene over to his place. And Bob says he actually thinks that I should make it too. And I might take him up on the offer. I mean, nothing says "not a threat" like showing up at somebody's house with guys with machine guns. (Laughter.)

It's perhaps a little less hilarious on the page than it must have been in person, but we can still see how, through the magic of irony, a vanishingly insignificant remark by a person in a position of power has been transformed to the first stirrings of Nixonian malignity and then back again to a joke with nothing about it changed save the context—and the will of those whose business it is to manipulate contexts to see it as one thing or the other.

Less was said on this occasion about the sequester, but there, too, what two weeks earlier had been a looming catastrophe for the country and the economic recovery was now a joke. The President even echoed the "Saturday Night Live" sketch a week earlier by saying that his "joke writers have been placed on furlough. (Laughter.) I know a lot of you reported that no one will feel any immediate impact because of the sequester. Well, you're about to find out how wrong you are. (Laughter.)" This, he said, was just one of the "major challenges" and "tough decisions" on which "I have my top advisors working around the clock. After all, my March Madness bracket isn't going to fill itself out. (Laughter.) And don't worry—there is an entire team in the situation room as we speak, planning my next golf outing, right now, at this moment. (Laughter.)"

Naturally, he was praised by the usual acolytes for his "self-deprecating" humor, but there was something a good deal more than self-deprecation in this speech. In several of its jokes there was a mocking awareness of how the media function and, in particular, of how

they manufacture scandal to suit their own political purposes. Thus he told the Gridiron diners that David Corn of *Mother Jones* magazine was among those present. "He brought his iPhone," he added. "So, Bobby Jindal, if you thought your remarks were off the record, ask Mitt Romney about that. (Applause.)" He was alluding, of course, to the "Forty-seven percent" remark at a closed fundraiser whose publication by a Woodwardian scandal-hunter was widely thought to have cost Mr. Romney the election. But that was also a reminder of the President's own brush with political mortality four years earlier—about which he also had something to say.

> Of course, maintaining credibility in this cynical atmosphere is harder than ever—incredibly challenging. My administration recently put out a photo of me skeet shooting, and even that wasn't enough for some people. Next week, we're releasing a photo of me clinging to religion. (Laughter and applause.)

Being cynical about cynicism is admittedly a hard thing to pull off, but to me there is a kind of insolent arrogance in Mr. Obama's confession to the media that he is engaged in an effort at media manipulation—and being (as he no doubt expected he would be) applauded by the media for it. Like the German soldiers looking for Burt Lancaster in *The Train*, the media chose to treat this as a joke, but what else could they do? The shame of admitting that during the Obama presidency they have been even more manipulated than manipulating would, I imagine, have been just too much for them to bear.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

Mao's murderous legacy *by Arthur Waldron*
Tocqueville's aristocracy *by Harvey Mansfield*
Chinese artist Yue Minjun in Paris *by Anthony Daniels*
Eighteenth-century London *by Pat Rogers*
Against aesthetics *by William Logan*
Eleanor Clark's Rome *by Emily Esfahani-Smith*
New poems *by Garrick Davis & Joseph Harrison*

Books

The theatre of E. E. Cummings

by John Simon

Poetic theater, in today's world, is a risky business. T. S. Eliot tried it, and before him Auden and Isherwood. But who reads their plays nowadays? Christopher Fry was the last to have an ephemeral success with it, but his vogue, indeed his reputation, is justly over. In the early twentieth century, the Britishers Lascelles Abercrombie, Gordon Bottomley, and John Drinkwater practiced it with modest success, but they are, even with their nontheatrical verse, well forgotten by now. Abercrombie and Fitch may have made it in a quite different field, but by today even Fitch has disappeared.

"Concerning [Hardy's] *The Dynasts* opinions have not yet crystallized," opined *A Literary History of England* in 1967, but by now they have pretty much crystallized into a *No*. Yeats's verse plays may eke out a precarious existence in academia, but elsewhere they have joined the doornails. Louis MacNeice's *The Dark Tower* is preferable to Archibald MacLeish's *The Fall of the City*, but both are merely radio plays. We can forget about MacLeish's *J.B.*, ditto the complete Maxwell Anderson, and Edna Millay's *Aria da Capo* is the merest amiable trifle. But most of these are verse plays; poetic plays in prose may have fared a bit better. Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows* comes to mind, but even that has sorrowfully sunk into oblivion. Tennessee Williams comes closest to a prose poet of the theater, but I would rather think of his oeuvre as very rich prose.

Now there appears a book entitled *The Theatre of E. E. Cummings*, which contains a long poetic play in prose, *Him*, and a short one in verse, *Santa Claus*, plus a negligible fragment, *Anthropos*, and a ballet, *Tom*, which may be danceable but does not bear reading.[1] Edited by George Firmage, the book also contains a valuable afterword by the Cummings specialist Norman Friedman, which actually makes something like sense of *Him*, but I will examine the play from the point of view of someone who hasn't read the afterword, as most readers wouldn't till afterward, as its positioning would seem to indicate.

Him (1926) has had a certain underground half-life, though few have read it and even fewer have seen one of its rare productions. The main characters are Him, a playwright struggling to give birth to a play, and Me, his girlfriend, birthing their child. Reviewing the book version in 1927, Edmund Wilson wrote, "The main action . . . is evidently an ether dream in the mind of the heroine, and the climax the revelation of the reason her being under ether." As Richard S. Kennedy puts it in his fine biography, *Dreams in the Mirror*, "Cummings put a great deal of Elaine [his first wife] into Me," but had by 1925 already met Anne Barton, his future second wife. Whereas Elaine was upper-class and gregarious, Anne was lower-class and promiscuous, each of them leaving a husband to marry the poet. Anne, too, is in Me, a quotation from her even serving as epigraph.

The play comprises scenes with the three Fates who talk amusingly surreal nonsense,

1 *The Theatre of E. E. Cummings*, edited by George James Firmage; Liveright, 224 pages, $27.95.

travestied commercial slogans studding piquant non-sequiturs. Other scenes consist of lengthy conversations between Him and Me, sometimes only as voices in the dark. In one scene, an Englishman carrying his unconscious in a trunk on his back is confronted by a detective and a policeman, with dire consequences for peeking into the inside. In another, two ugly American businessmen in a Paris restaurant with their women exchange personalities by swapping masks, presumably in a parody of O'Neill's *Great God Brown*.

It is hard to view much of this as Me's fantasies; rather, Cummings seems to have accumulated fantasies of his own as they randomly occurred to him. Take the one where four caricatured Fairies (i.e. homosexuals) are confronted by a burlesque Mussolini. Or another, involving a sexy Negress carrying a boy doll, with a black chorus singing a version of "Frankie and Johnie," as Cummings spells Johnny in one of his frequent misspellings, some deliberate, some probably not. Or the long final section, in which the Doctor (Me's gynecologist recurring in several, sometimes ominous roles) is a circus barker, introducing a number of grotesque freaks with grandiloquent fustian.

As Kennedy writes, Cummings put a great deal of himself into Him, but at this point "neither his personal nor his creative life were [sic] significantly under control for him to be able to unify the fascinating assembly of parts" in what "remains a conglomeration of brilliant insights, will-o'-the-wisp digressions, moving poetic speeches, tiresome verbal nonsense, provocative ideas."

There are telling elements. There is much looking into the mirror (a frequent theme also in the poems); the rage against Puritanism (the sexy black Frankie chasing away the censor in the audience who rises in protest of her brandishing Johnie's cut off "best part" at the spectators; and various surrealist or expressionist devices. Thus there is a backdrop with holes for the heads of doctor and patient, sometimes filled by the Doctor and Me; thus, too, the room with Him and Me revolves from scene to scene with each time a different wall becoming the invisible fourth. Or take Him's insistence that not he but The Other, lurking in the mirror, is writing the play we are witnessing.

Many scenes, though, are perfect non sequiturs. So Act One, Scene Three sees a Soap Box Orator, played by the Doctor, delivering a four-page monologue, mostly about a dread disease called Cinderella, before an ever-increasing, then ever-decreasing number of mute onlookers. Surely this is Absurdism *avant la lettre.*

Or take for example the three recurring Fates, knitting female figures with their backs to the audience, who open the play. "*First*: We called our hippopotamus It's Toasted. *Second*: I wish my husband didn't object to them. *Third*: Of course it's a bother to clean the cage every day. *Second:* O I wouldn't mind doing that. *First*: Be sure to get one that can sing. *Third*: Don't they all sing? *First*: O dear no. Some of them just whistle."

Soon the Doctor arrives with Him, whom he introduces as Mr. Anybody to those he calls the Weird Sisters: Miss Stop, Miss Look, and Miss Listen. Then he adds, "'Anybody' is just his nomb D. ploom you know. My friend is strictly incog." To which Him replies, "My real name, ladies, is Everyman, Marquis de la Poussière."

Presently Him and Me are conversing, with her declaring that she doesn't care about anything, to which Him, sitting on the onstage table, responds: "Whereas this is what's untrue. Anything everything nothing and something were looking for eels in a tree, when along came sleep pushing a wheelbarrow full of green mice. *Me* (to herself): I thought so. . . . *Him*: I however thought that it was the taller of the two umbrellas who lit a match when they found themselves in the main street of Hocuspocus side by each riding elephants made of candy."

Not all is quite as bizarre as that. As Edmund Wilson wrote in a 1927 letter, "It is a mess, but the best parts of it are wonderful." That idea is developed in his review of the book version. He censures the author's self-indulgence, "He seems to understand everything, but does not systematize his flood of

impressions. . . . This play is the shimmering scaturience of an intelligence and sensibility of the very first distinction—but a drama deficient in dramatic logic." We get "capital conception . . . with a strange lack of instinct for climax." There is, however, much that is good, but it is "in the scenes between the lovers that . . . genius principally appears. They are, to my mind, more successful than anything in his poetry."

So much in 1927. But I find it curiously echoed, as late as 1954, by Randall Jarrell reviewing Cummings's poetry: "There is so much love—love infinite and eternal, love in the movie moonlight, after the prop champagne—that one values all the more the real love affair in Cummings's play *Him*." Perhaps Cummings's friend John Dos Passos summarized it best: "His mind was essentially extemporaneous."

So much extemporaneity is hard to stage, or sell to a large public. *The Theatre of E. E. Cummings* lists several productions, mostly marginal, in small, out-of-the way theaters or at universities. I do, however, remember a 1948 production at the Provincetown Playhouse that I thoroughly enjoyed. It brings to mind Marianne Moore's comment: "Some of it seems to me as imaginative and expert as anything of his . . . and some of it to the contrary."

We come now to the other real play, the short but charming *Santa Claus* (1946), which Cummings subtitles "A Morality" with reference to that medieval dramatic genre. It is about the contest between understanding—which is tantamount to love, and is good—and knowledge—which is tantamount to mere loveless science, and is bad.

Santa Claus is distressed because nobody wants to take what he has to give, i.e., understanding; Death is distressed because nobody wants to give what is his to take. They decide to exchange masks, and Death convinces Santa that people, i.e., the Mob, want only things that do not exist, and so persuades him to become a salesman of nonexistent wheelmines, peddling them to greedy people. Death, however, will wear Santa's fleshly disguise to seduce a girl down the block who loves embonpoint, and who'll later appear as the Woman. Santa does good business selling interest in wheelmines to gullible people, until a rumor of a terrible accident at the wheelmines turns the Mob against him. He is saved by convincing them that he doesn't exist, and is therefore innocent.

The Child, whom he doesn't recognize, convinces Santa that they must find a vanished person they both miss, namely him. The Mob returns triumphantly carrying the hanged Death in Santa Claus disguise. The Child dances happily back, guiding the sad Woman grieving for her lost lover, whose voice she recognizes in the dreaded Death. Taking off that mask, the hero reveals himself a fine young man, now reunited with the Woman who, kneeling at his feet, declares the Child "Ours."

The writing is in effective blank verse. Take this from Death:

> Imagine, if you can, a world so blurred
> That its inhabitants are one another
> —an idiotic monster of negation:
> so timid, it would rather starve itself
> eternally than run the risk of choking;
> so greedy, nothing satisfies its hunger
> but always huger quantities of nothing—
> a world so lazy that it cannot dream;
> so blind, it worships its own ugliness:
> a world so false, so trivial. So unso,
> phantoms are solid by comparison.

In his afterword, Norman Friedman, author of *E. E. Cummings: The Growth of a Writer*, observes: "Cummings has come a long way, via *Tom*, from *Him*. Although each work involves the problem of the human trinity—father, mother, child—*Santa Claus* is quite different from *Him* . . . . The unborn baby was the main precipitant of strife between lover and lady in *Him*, whereas here the child is the chief agent of salvation and reconciliation." That child has much to do with Nancy, Cummings's own daughter.

I wonder whether on the basis of a mere fragment, a ballet, and one short and one overlong play one can make the claim that Denis

Donoghue does in *The Third Voice*: "Cummings is a *poète de théâtre*. *Him* and *Santa Claus* exhibit in their author a remarkable flair for the theatre as a medium of expression, for the theatre as such, not for the theatre as a receptacle into which lyric verse may be insinuated." But both these works have their interest, even their charm. And there is an irony here: whereas formerly the much-read poetry of Cummings would have led people to his plays, today, these plays might lead readers to his poetry, which, *pace* Jarrell, is very much worth reading.

Churchill, the early years

Michael Shelden
Young Titan:
The Making of Winston Churchill.
Simon & Schuster, 400 pages, $30

reviewed by Charles S. Dameron

The first weeks of September 1911 found a thirty-six-year-old Winston Churchill crouched on the beach at Broadstairs, Kent with shovel and pail, determinedly digging an elaborate suite of "stout fortifications and sand castles."

Churchill, then Home Secretary and a leading light of Prime Minister H. H. Asquith's Liberal government, naturally attracted the attention of a correspondent for the *Daily Mirror*, which next day ran a story titled "Mr. Churchill's Spade Work." Though he avowed that his purpose was merely to amuse his daughter and other children on the beach, Churchill's close friends suspected that their Winston's active imagination was at work on something else. Family lawyer and confidante Eddie Marsh read the piece and wrote, "I wonder if the Germans heard that the Home Secretary was spending his holiday in personally fortifying the South Coast!"

Our own popular imagination is stuck, probably permanently, on an image of Churchill as a portly old *pater patriae*, conservative hero, and scourge of the Nazis. Any accounting of Churchill's whole life is inevitably dominated by those crucial years when he propped up the West with his words and negotiated a new world order with Roosevelt and Stalin. Last year's celebrated release of William Manchester's and Paul Reid's *The Last Lion: Defender of the Realm, 1940–1965*, the final volume of Manchester's trilogy, reaffirms this teleological view of the Man with the Cigar.

Michael Shelden's charming new biography, *Young Titan*, provides a satisfying counterpoint to the traditional theme by restricting itself to Churchill's extraordinary exploits as a man on the make, between the ages of twenty-six and forty. "If he had died when he was forty," Shelden writes, "his story would still be one of the best of the century, in part a riveting drama of ambition, in part a sobering tragedy." The drama is driven by the delightfully creative spirit of the overgrown boy at its center; the tragedy is in the vanquishing of this boy, the celebrity political *wunderkind* of Edwardian England, at the narrative's conclusion.

Churchill's sand constructions (one summer he mentioned to Clementine, his wife, that "we ought to find a really good sandy beach where I can cut the sand into a nicely beveled fortress—or best of all with a little stream running down—You might explore and report") were a minor medium by which he above all else sought, as Shelden puts it, "to create worlds of his own without having to ask anyone else's opinion or permission." His endearing and almost unlimited capacity for guileless scheming would carry him further in the world, and more quickly, than any of his peers. Three categories of scheme—financial, political, and romantic, all pursued concurrently—animated Churchill's early adulthood.

Impressive strides on the first two fronts were rapidly achieved upon his return home after escaping imprisonment in the Transvaal. Having traveled to South Africa to cover the Second Boer War as a newspaper correspondent embedded with British troops, Churchill was captured in battle and held for three weeks before he ran for it, covering hundreds of miles on foot and by train to Portuguese East Africa.

The incident made him a hero back home, and besides successfully standing for Parliament as a Conservative in October 1900, Churchill had the good sense to cash in by

writing a bestseller, *London to Ladysmith via Pretoria*, and going on the speaker's circuit. His talks across Britain in the month after his election to the House of Commons netted him £4,000, equivalent to twice the yearly salary of a London newspaper editor.

Shelden's narrative begins on a Winnipeg-bound train, where our young gallant is wrapping up his lucrative North American tour and writing out a love letter to Pamela Plowden, a society beauty of great renown. She had just turned down a marriage proposal from her eager suitor, whose lack of an inherited fortune dampened his eligibility. Indeed, the search for a suitable mate proved somewhat difficult for Churchill, who chased fruitlessly after a number of elusive women throughout his twenties, suffering three rejections for betrothal.

His thirties brought better luck, with two important women coming into his life. The first was Asquith's daughter, Violet, whose unrequited love for Churchill eventually evolved into deep friendship and crucial political alliance. The second was Clementine Hozier, who offered a certain amorous mystique that Churchill apparently found wanting in Violet. Shelden breaks new ground in this period of Churchill's life by delving into his relationship with Miss Asquith, a relationship whose romantic dimension has previously been neglected by other biographers.

Indeed, among the most compelling vignettes drawn in Shelden's work is one which has, until now, never appeared in print: a manic trip to a seaside Scottish castle, where Churchill offered to Violet a painful explanation of his engagement to Clementine. Clemmie, for her part, nearly broke off the engagement out of jealousy over the episode.

In time, Clementine and Violet came to befriend each other and played important and complementary roles in Churchill's development. Clemmie provided the cushion of emotional security and constancy that Churchill craved. Violet was an indispensable advisor and advocate, shrewdly working to advance Churchill's political career (in this sense displacing Churchill's mother, Jennie, who did so much to secure her son's place in the world in his early life). Her father, the prime minister, assumed something of a paternal role for Churchill, carefully overseeing the path by which his young protégé passed from success to success in various ministries. The cozy patronage, and Churchill's bends-inducing ascent, would help earn the young man much envy and much hatred from fellow politicians on both sides of the aisle. But it brought him all the opportunity he needed to demonstrate his manifold political talents.

He put those talents to work as a committed progressive reformer. This is the same Churchill who, as Tory prime minister decades later, railed against Labour socialism. In his younger years, Churchill committed himself to dramatic efforts at reconfiguring the British social contract by championing, among other things: the Labour Exchanges Act, creating a national system of employment agencies; the Trade Boards Act, which helped establish a regulatory system of minimum wages and working conditions; and the National Insurance Act, inaugurating national unemployment insurance. His object, articulated in a speech in Dundee, Scotland, was to satisfy "the need of this nation for a more complete or elaborate social organization."

That view was elaborated in a 1909 policy tract, *Liberalism and the Social Problem*, that won effusive praise from such prominent leftists as J. A. Hobson and H. W. Massingham. Most remarkable is the opinion of Beatrice Webb, who wrote of Churchill in 1908 that he was "brilliantly able" and more reliable a liberal standard-bearer than David Lloyd George, who had "less intellect than Winston, and not such an attractive personality—more of the preacher, less of the statesman."

On this point, Shelden is just as partial to Churchill as was Webb, and his account of the unstable alliance and rivalry between Lloyd George and Churchill suffers, at times, from a palpable one-sidedness, with the former caricatured as a relentlessly craven, gremlin-like cipher—a perfect villain. The polemical dichotomy fits naturally within Shelden's mission to apportion greater credit to Churchill for the advent of the British welfare state, but it's a source of weakness in an otherwise strong work.

In a book filled with opportunistic characters—Lloyd George, Asquith, and Joseph Chamberlain among them—it's a wonder that Shelden is unwilling occasionally to turn a more critical eye on his primary subject, a publicity hound happy to switch parties and policies as needed, a man of supremely aristocratic birth who tried to out-demagogue Lloyd George by calling the House of Lords "a miserable minority of titled persons who represent nobody, who are responsible to nobody, and who only scurry up to London to vote in their party interests, in their class interests, and in their own interests."

But such shortcomings are hard to find, and they detract little from Shelden's work or the magnificence of the character that emerges in this compact volume. The author's last book was *Mark Twain: Man in White*, which chronicled the last years of another great man about whom (it sometimes seems) everything has been said. Here, as there, Shelden has capitalized on an understudied period of an iconic life and proved that such a study can still surprise. "He is a wonderful creature," Asquith said of Churchill, not long before he dismissed him from the Admiralty to save his own skin after the disaster at Gallipoli, "with . . . what someone said of genius—'a zigzag streak of lightning in the brain.'"

Devil in the details

Vladimir Tismaneanu
The Devil in History: Communism, Fascism, & Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century.
University of California Press, 336 pages, $34.95

reviewed by Paul Hollander

The reader must be warned that it is difficult to do justice in a limited space to this ambitious and thoughtful book that explores the most tragic and momentous historical phenomena of the past century and their attempted legitimation. Aptly summed up by its author, the book "is a comprehensive, comparative essay on the intellectual origins, the crimes, and the failure of the radical totalitarian movements that ravaged the last century." It also examines the decay and collapse of communist systems and the conditions which emerged in post-communist Eastern Europe.

It takes determination and formidable erudition to wade into the controversies which for several decades have enveloped and often obscured the concept of totalitarianism. The author is highly qualified to undertake this task. He grew up in communist Romania and thus experienced life in a totalitarian society; subsequently he devoted much of his professional life to studying both the theories and practices of communist systems as they unfolded in Eastern Europe. This is not to suggest that personal experience proves beyond doubt the usefulness of the concept, but rather that the experience of political realities often helps to better understand both the concepts these realities gave rise to and the ideas which created those realities in the first place.

Tismaneanu has undertaken to demonstrate that the concept is meaningful and to elucidate the significant similarities (without ignoring the differences) between Nazism and Soviet communism—similarities which are at the heart of the idea of totalitarianism as well as its most contentious attribute. The other main theme of the book is the relationship between the ideals and propositions of Marxism and the practices of communist states which claimed Marxist credentials and inspiration—another much debated issue among Western intellectuals.

Readers may be reminded that the concept of totalitarianism emerged to capture the distinctiveness of exceptionally repressive and murderous political systems such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin, followed by China under Mao, and Castro's Cuba. These regimes were substantially different from other autocracies, or tyrannies of the past (or others which coexisted with them). They were repressive in new ways and for new reasons. They vastly expanded the meaning of what is "political," thereby legitimating state control of areas of life which, for other autocratic governments, were matters of indifference. This enormous, and not fully successful, undertaking was inspired by

strongly held secular religious beliefs and a commitment to transform fundamentally both social institutions and actual human beings. These systems were distinguished by their proclaimed and persistent efforts to unite theory and practice, political ideals and social realities. The latter required vast amounts of political violence and coercion since the societies in question had to be purified of all those who were seen as objecting to or obstructing the unprecedented social engineering project. Some theorists such as Hannah Arendt and Robert Nisbet suggested that the rise of these systems was a by-product of modernity marked by the decline of community, social isolation, and loss of shared purpose. Totalitarian societies, their deified leaders, and secular religious beliefs provided welcome alternatives—or so it seemed—to these conditions.

Numerous Western intellectuals who sympathized with communist systems on account of their ideals, especially their ostensible egalitarian aspirations, disliked the concept of totalitarianism because it implied moral equivalence between Nazism and Communism. Critics of the concept further argued that these systems failed to achieve their goal of establishing total domination and became less repressive as time went by and their deified leaders (Stalin and Mao) died. But, as Leszek Kolakowski wrote "When we speak of totalitarian regimes we have in mind not systems that have reached perfection, but rather those which are driven by a never-ending *effort* to reach it, to swallow all channels of human communication, and to eradicate all spontaneous social life forms."

As the author sees it, "the key distinction" between Nazism and Communism was that "the Nazis had no humanist original project to invoke—no enlightened reservoir of betrayed libertarian hopes to be resurrected." Even after Khrushchev's revelations in 1956 and the testimony of Solzhenitsyn, there remained among Western intellectuals "a lingering sentiment that there was after all, something moral in Bolshevik utopianism." Tismaneanu further points out that

> National Socialism never achieved the level of theoretical coherence and conceptual sophistication comparable to the Marxian paradigm. . . . Yet the inner core of deep anti-capitalist, anti-liberal and anti-democratic obsessions could be found in both of these otherwise inimical doctrines.

The ideological foundations of the two systems had crucial commonalities: "Fascism was no less a fantasy of salvation than was Bolshevism: both promised to rescue humanity from the bondage of capitalist mercantilism and to ensure the advent of total community." The similarities were further determined by the purifying intentions of these systems:

> Both defined their enemies on the basis of their potential for blocking the realization of the perfect community. . . . Millions of human lives were destroyed as a result of the conviction that the sorry state of mankind could be corrected if only the ideologically designated "vermin" were eliminated.

Equally important is that both communists and Nazis "believed that fundamental change was possible."

The most valuable contribution of this book is its rigorous and definitive demonstration of the integral connection between utopian ideals and the serene ruthlessness characteristic of these "ideologically driven" systems. Communist rulers were no less convinced than the Nazis that, to create a better world, they had to liquidate millions of human beings classified as politically undesirable.

As to the limitations of Marxism to inspire *enduring* social-political practices, Tismaneanu suggests that it failed "because it underestimated the existential quandaries of human existence, the needs of man for deep spiritual or cultural sources of meaning." Marxism could not fulfill its "promise of universal transformation" and "a reconciliation of man with nature and history."

This important book would more likely have the influence it deserves if its language were less dense and more accessible, compelling at times even the educated reader to reach for the dictionary. A bibliography would have also

been welcome, especially given the abundance of excellent source materials which the endnotes neither highlight nor help to locate.

Notwithstanding these minor problems, this volume achieves the rare distinction of being at once nuanced and impassioned. It is likely to remain a durable contribution to a deeper understanding of the great historical outrages of the past century which were closely linked to the concept and reality of totalitarianism.

A terrible god to worship

Roy Scranton & Matt Gallagher, editors
Fire & Forget: Short Stories from the Long War.
Da Capo Press, 256 pages, $15.99

reviewed by Steven McGregor

Fire and Forget is the latest offering of the military-publishing complex, devoted to printing the works of returning soldiers and their spouses. The fifteen stories gathered here describe, in various ways, action in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the difficulties encountered in returning to civilian life. The collection also features some experiments with form, including a sardonic "choose your own adventure" which places the reader inside the gun-turret of a Humvee. Despite all this variety, however, there is a disappointing consistency of tone and effect. Stock characters frequently reappear—the deranged enlisted man, the hapless officer, the meddling civilian—and rarely do they challenge stereotypes. Additionally, questions of the authors' motivations are unavoidable as these stories seem designed to support one viewpoint with regard to war.

Brian Van Reet's "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek" is a good example of the collection as a whole. This story is about two wounded soldiers, Rooster and Sleed, who go on a fishing trip, hoping to find solace in nature. Among other injuries, Rooster's face has been masked, burned featureless by fire. He reflects, "'Wounded warriors'—the term the Army used to refer to us in official memoranda. . . . 'I guess it's what we were, but the phrase was too cute to do our ugliness justice.'" Exacerbating his physical injuries are his loneliness and a family that, at least in his eyes, is of no use. His father is a government employee who tests chemical and biological weapons on monkeys while his mother spends "her days watching cable news and talking to the cat." Rooster blames them for his wounds with a rhetorical appeal to the reader: "How could they have known their values would lead me to this? That all that safety would push me into the fire?"

And here is the collection's main issue: it's overreliance on self-conscious lament. It is indicated in Van Reet's title, a parody of Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River." (Many authors in the collection are graduates of MFA programs and workshops; they seem determined to achieve some type of literary authenticity while at the same time rationalizing their military service.) The concept of Van Reet's story is also illustrative. "The whole situation was nightmarishly helpless," Rooster observes, again self-consciously. "But there it was, our bodies transformed in a flash I could not remember. The only thing now was deal with it. Time was reckoned in two halves, before and after." This statement applies to almost all of *Fire and Forget*. It is a string of situations, each describing soldiers who are nightmarishly helpless. They find themselves transformed in a flash of war almost impossible to remember. And instead of creating critical distance for the reader to assess the war, the characters are presented to us already judged: hideous ghouls such as Sleed, evil scientists such as Rooster's father, or naïve housewives, such as his mother. This fixed perspective prevents the reader from entering into Rooster's world at all. Thus when "Big Two-Hearted Hunting Creek" finishes, we are unable to grasp Rooster himself or the final image. He says, "Hailstones began to fall. They hit Big Hunting Creek like bullets ricocheting off depleted uranium armor."

What the reader soon realizes is that *Fire and Forget* is populated with a host of victims and psychopaths. Like Chinese actors, they wear identifiable masks. Could men named Rooster

and Sleed behave any different? Instead of entering into a bargain with the authors, or being seduced by them, the reader must submit to them completely. Roman Skaskiw's "Television," for instance, begins "It'd been a day since the attack . . . no one was hurt, just a local kid they shot." This is the voice of the omniscient third-person narrator, not a character. The reader is forced to accept this jocular tone toward violence, presumably to congratulate ourselves that we recognize the horror that the soldier-actors do not.

Two exceptions are the highlights of the collection, Colby Buzzell's "Play the Game" and Siobhan Fallon's "Tips for a Smooth Transition." Buzzell takes Van Reet one step further by having the protagonist undermine his self-examination with irreverent humor. He is lampooned in the final twist of the story. This has a powerfully revealing effect, deepening our understanding of how strange it can feel to return to civilian life. Fallon, by contrast, uses a romantic relationship to engage the reader. She is the only author in the entire collection who writes convincingly about love. Her two central characters are Colin, a soldier recently returned from Afghanistan, and his wife, Evie:

> Evie starts awake, feeling the bed quake. She realizes it is Colin. He gasps, a thick and struggling sound as if he can't get enough air. "Shhh, Colin. You're alright." Evie slips out of the bed. "Everything is OK." She walks across the dark room and turns on one of the lamps. "Wake up, Colin." Her husband groans and Evie wonders what images wrack him: cars that won't stop at checkpoints, the hiss of a mortar too close, smoke and gunfire.

Fallon's constant use of names maintains distance in an almost childlike way. But unlike other stories in the book, our alienation from the characters does not lessen our emotional response. We are able to think critically about Evie and Colin from many different angles. The returned soldier seen here has our sympathy, fear, and respect. Evie is also a figure we enjoy contemplating, unsure if we should want her to succeed in hiding her infidelity from her husband. These are the only two characters in the collection threatened by something other than war. The multidimensional scene that Fallon creates further entices the reader because it is impossible to guess how it will end. Nevertheless, it is within their power to choose—to maintain their marriage despite years of deployment or to go their separate ways.

Tellingly, Fallon is the only contributor who has never served in the military. Her husband is an army officer. It would seem that her position on the sidelines has enabled her to better connect with the reader. But in the other stories there is an almost religious attitude toward war. This is the transformative power Rooster references when he defines his life as "reckoned in two halves." Colum McCann agrees, writing that "We are scripted by war," in the foreword to the book. "It is the job of literature to confront the terrible truths of what war has done and continues to do to us." For him, war has power and agency—it is even a source of our collective identity. For the veterans in *Fire and Forget*, this divinity is not an abstract idea as it is for McCann, but it is a war made flesh, a previous experience in Iraq or Afghanistan on whose behalf they now proselytize. What a terrible god to worship.

Notebook

Deciphering a cigarette with Joseph Frank

by Gary Saul Morson

Joseph Frank (1918–2013), the eminent literary scholar and biographer of Dostoevsky, died in March 2013 at the age of ninety-four. He was well known for his interpretations of literary modernism, essays on twentieth-century French and German literature, and reflections on the great theorists of the novel. The unique approach and meticulous scholarship of his five-volume study of Dostoevsky (published 1976–2002) made it one of the great achievements in literary scholarship.

On the morning of December 22, 1849, Dostoevsky was condemned to death. Arrested eight months earlier for participation in a radical discussion group, he had languished in prison. Resisting the temptation to soften his fate by implicating others, he read *Jane Eyre* and wrote his happiest story.

Told nothing of where he was going that chilly morning, he was led from his cell to join other prisoners in a march to the Semenovsky Square. There, amid stakes, scaffolds, and coffins, they were read a sentence of death and offered last rites. Dostoevsky, who was a believer, turned to one of his fellow prisoners and said: "Today we will be in paradise," but his friend, an atheist and materialist, replied mockingly, "A handful of dust!" At the last possible moment, when the guns were trained on the condemned, an imperial courier galloped up with the news that Tsar Nicholas, defender of the faith and emperor of all the Russias, had commuted their punishment to Siberian imprisonment followed by service in the army. The entire scene had been planned in advance as part of the punishment. Dostoevsky, it seems, was not Russia's only master of psychology.

Over the course of his five-volume narrative of Dostoevsky's life, Frank tells the author's story with an eye to detail and an unequalled sense of ideologically charged incidents. By universal consent, Frank's biography has no rival in any language. If we consider the almost religious reverence Russians show to literature, this achievement becomes all the more remarkable.

Frank came to Dostoevsky late, when he already had a distinguished career dating to the 1930s as a journalist and cultural critic. His interpretation of literary modernism, *Spatial Form in Modern Literature* (1945), rapidly became a classic. Without even having earned a bachelor's degree, he was accepted in 1952 as a doctoral student by the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, where he worked on Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and decided to learn Russian. He planned to write a one-volume biography of Dostoevsky, but, like Dostoevsky's unplanned masterpiece *The Idiot*, the work took on a life of its own.

I met Frank in the early 1970s when, as a Yale graduate student, I attended a lecture on his forthcoming work. The lecture was actually read by Frank's friend, Yale's Robert Louis Jackson, because Frank had a stammer. It was only much later I understood that this stammer, once much worse, had been the defining fact of his life. He had retreated from speech into literature and developed in writing the

expressive power otherwise denied him. I have often wondered whether Frank's initial attraction to Dostoevsky reflected his sympathy with Dostoevsky's own malady—epilepsy—which also became a source of insight.

Frank proposed a different *kind* of biography. Usually, he explained, biographers focus on an author's closest acquaintances, personal concerns, and quotidian experiences. They treat the composition of the works as just another event in the author's life. Readers discover the real person on whom a famous character was based and the real tragedy that inspired a hero's suffering. However interesting, such accounts reduce masterpieces to symptoms.

Frank wondered at this approach. For surely the main reason we care about the author in the first place is his works! The development of the writer's thought and art should therefore be the biographer's principal concern. In his first volume, Frank explains that he focuses only "on those aspects of [Dostoevsky's] quotidian experience" that serve to deepen our understanding of what makes the works profound. "My work is thus not a biography, or if so, only in a special sense—for I do not go from the life to the work, but rather the other way round." Accuracy to "the hierarchy of values in the life of any creative personality" requires elucidating the "socio-cultural milieu in which the author lived." Above all, Frank traces Dostoevsky's role in the intellectual debates of his time and the way in which they shaped the ideas, images, and incidents of his novels.

Regardless of whether or not this approach would work equally well with all novelists, it fits this one perfectly. Dostoevsky lived ideologically, argued with his friends and coworkers in philosophically charged terms, and, as one of his characters describes himself, actually "felt ideas." In retelling the famous execution scene and its aftermath, Frank shows how details others overlook shaped Dostoevsky's thought about how the mind works in extreme situations. That conversation with a condemned materialist was to resonate in his descriptions of revolutionaries, murderers, and suicides. The peculiar mix of despair and hope that gives his novels their distinctive tone reflect this moment as Frank describes it.

Or consider Frank's account of how Dostoevsky met his second wife. In desperate need of ready cash, Dostoevsky had signed a contract with the unscrupulous publisher Stellovsky to deliver a novel by a certain date. Stellovsky was actually interested in the forfeit provisions, which would have allowed him to publish all Dostoevsky's works, including those to come, for free. A month before the deadline, Dostoevsky mentioned to a friend that the novel he was working on, *Crime and Punishment*, was far from ready. Alarmed, his friend mentioned that there was a new science, stenography, and suggested that Dostoevsky hire someone from the first graduating class and just dictate a novel off the top of his head. The stenographer he employed eagerly anticipated meeting the writer who was already a legend at her home but was shocked by his weird appearance. Only later did she learn he was just recovering from an epileptic seizure.

The crucial moment came when he offered her a cigarette. Only Frank, with his attention attuned to the symbols of the day, ever noticed this incident's importance. Smoking was then not merely a badge but a requirement for every young radical. As it happened, Dostoevsky had long wanted to remarry, but the sort of strong, independent woman interesting to him was likely to despise his conservative, Christian opinions. And so when the stenographer, Anna Grigoryevna, announced she did not smoke, he immediately wondered: in that case, perhaps she believes in God? In fact, she did, and, as the dictation proceeded, he day by day grew more interested in her. Gradually he gave the passages of the novel a second meaning as a coded message of love for her.

They finished the book just before the deadline. Dostoevsky called it *The Gambler* ostensibly because its hero, like Dostoevsky himself, suffered from a gambling addiction, but also because in completing it he had won his high-stakes match with Stellovsky.

Anticipating this possibility, Stellovsky left town so that the novel could not be delivered in time. Dostoevsky was in despair until the ever-practical Anna Grigoryevna advised him

to register his attempted delivery with the local police as proof of his timeliness. A few days later, Dostoevsky gambled again. He paid a visit to Anna Grigoryevna, who was living with her parents. Explaining that the dictation had proven so successful that he wanted to employ her for another novel, he asked her advice about its ending. The story, he explained, concerned an older man resembling himself who proposed to a younger woman resembling her, but he could not figure out how the heroine would answer. Anna Grigoryevna got the point, and though she wanted to think it over, knew that the morbidly sensitive man would be deeply hurt. So she replied: "Why should she not marry him, if she loves him?"

Only after she married him did she realize what her life would be. The couple had to escape abroad so he would not be thrown into debtor's prison. Moving from one cheap hotel to another, they lived in terrible want and lost a child—in Dostoevsky's view, because of poverty. When he finished one novella he did not have the postage to send it to Russia. As he tried to escape from debt, he gave in to his gambling addiction. In between visits to the pawnshop, letters to his publisher pleading for advances, and epileptic seizures, he wrote *The Idiot* and *The Possessed*. Frank brings to life the dark obsessions, mystical transports, religious despair, and political messianism that filled Dostoevsky's mind as he struggled to write under conditions that those aristocrats, Tolstoy and Turgenev, never faced. He noted spitefully: "Turgenev would die at the very thought!" It did not help that he owed Turgenev money.

Despite his precarious position, Dostoevsky refused to cheapen his works or to hew an ideological line. Often considered the greatest political novel every written, *The Possessed* describes in detail what we have come to know as totalitarianism. It's all there: attempts to transform human nature, ruthless egalitarianism, a system of universal spying, and the sacrifice of what one gleeful terrorist calls "a hundred million heads." Since just about everyone else in Russia saw the future as a triumph of liberalism and gentleness, they regarded Dostoevsky as mad. Frank shows us just what signs Dostoevsky read in the thinkers of his time that enabled him to grasp, before anyone else, what these intellectuals would do if they ever seized power. No wonder the Bolsheviks despised him.

When critics spend decades on a writer, they usually lose their objectivity and become defense attorneys. With Dostoevsky, the real test is his anti-Semitism. Although Dostoevsky once advocated Jewish rights, he later adopted the sort of views that helped inspire the Nazis. When Frank was only beginning his project, he wrote an essay (which I criticized) putting the best face on Dostoevsky's noxious opinions. But by the time Frank completed the final volume, he demonstrated the courage to reverse himself and show that in fact Dostoevsky's views were even worse than appeared. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the saintly Alyosha is asked whether Jews really perform ritual torture and murder of Christian children, and he answers, "I don't know." I had guessed that Dostoevsky would have said the same, but Frank shows that, in fact, he was privately sure these accusations were true.

Drawn as he was to the political left, Frank recognizes just why Dostoevsky could find his enemies attractive as well as dangerous. Destructiveness has its own aesthetic, and Frank quotes Dostoevsky's comment that, to the French Communards, the burning of Paris "doesn't seem madness, but, on the contrary, *beauty*."

When a conservative paper dismissed the Russian terrorist movement as a group of "idle and undeveloped" misfits, Dostoevsky replied that the very opposite was the case. I myself was one of them, he reminded readers, "I also stood on the scaffold condemned to death and I assure you that I stood in the company of educated people." Even the most refined and morally best people can find it impossible to resist a reigning "cycle of ideas and concepts." The point of *The Possessed*, he explains, is that "even the purest of hearts can be drawn into committing a monstrous act. And therein lies the real horror: that one can commit the foulest and most villainous act without being in the least a villain."

Dostoevsky's own anti-Semitism, as Frank describes it, illustrates the point. In pulling no punches about this horror, Frank remains true to Dostoevsky's courageous spirit and so honors him all the more.

Letters

Lustration frustration

To the Editors:
A note about a review by Carl Rollyson (*The New Criterion*, January 2013) of Artur Domosławski's biography of Ryszard Kapuściński. Your reviewer uncritically accepts the biographer's opinions on a number of extremely controversial issues, among them lustration, Kapuściński himself, the Polish secret services, and how we should judge those who informed for them. He is aware, as he himself admits, of how controversial these issues are, which makes his failure to examine critically the book's claims all the more surprising.

The question of whether Kapuściński was an informer is not an open one; we know that he was. Admittedly, as foreign correspondent for an official newspaper in a communist country, Kapuściński may have had no choice but to cooperate with the secret police if he wanted to go abroad. But it is worth noting that no one forced him to become a foreign correspondent in the first place; he made a choice. Many talented writers preferred to remain poor, jobless, unlionized, and untraveled. Your reviewer's only comment on this choice, however, is the bizarre "You have to give up something to get something." I am not sure what this is supposed to mean, but it seems disingenuous at best, and unpleasantly reminiscent of talk of breaking eggs to make omelets. And to say that "certain American journalists followed much the same course with the CIA," thus setting up the old false moral equivalence between the U.S. and communist states and suggesting that working for the CIA was no different from working for the communist secret police, beggars belief. It was a startling thing to read in *The New Criterion*.

Rollyson also mentions that one of the people he knew in Poland informed on him, suggesting that this was something normal, acceptable, and necessary. It was none of these things. Your reviewer appears to have been singularly unfortunate in his Polish friends. He also accepts the claim that Kapuściński did no one any harm—a standard claim made by apologists for police informers in communist Poland and in this case, as in most others, a false one. Kapuściński provided information about the private lives of people abroad which left them open to blackmail by the communist secret police.

Finally, it has been established that the Soviet Union was not prepared to invade Poland; proof of this is available and has been published. While it is correct to say that many people believed at the time that the USSR might have been capable of doing so, to say that they *rightly* believed this is a falsehood.

This biography, far from being without a political agenda, is a neat exercise in anti-lustration propaganda. This is admittedly not something one could expect a foreign reviewer to be aware of, but one does expect a minimum of critical appraisal. And one certainly does not expect to be lectured about giving up something in order to get something, or that the CIA is just like the Polish secret police.

Agnieszka Kolakowska
Paris

Carl Rollyson replies:
I don't believe in moral equivalence and that the CIA in the Cold War period was the same as the Polish police. If I gave that impression to other readers, I am sorry. Did Kapuściński do harm by informing on others? I don't know. What I do say is that the biographer discovered no evidence of harm. And I did not see any evidence to the contrary offered in the letter objecting to my review.

Copycat quandary

To the Editors:
James Panero writes in "The Culture of the Copy" (*The New Criterion*, January 2013) that my college professor Ed Banfield suggested museums sell their original works and replace them with passable facsimiles—a suggestion for which your founder Hilton Kramer criticized him. This gives the wrong impression. Ed thought many second-rate

museums felt they had to purchase only original works, and, due to their very limited budgets, they could only afford second-rate art originals. As a result, museumgoers in smaller cities did not have the opportunity to view first-rate art. He thought that the Rockefellers and others had created copies of well-known works which were indistinguishable from the originals and which sold for relatively modest prices. Therefore, why not allow smaller, less wealthy museums to purchase these copies so their publics could view first-rate rather than second-rate art? It sounded reasonable to me when Ed proposed it, and it sounds reasonable to me now. I am at a loss to understand why the art community so violently objects to this.

Robert L. Freedman, Esq.
Philadelphia

James Panero replies:

The use of copies has an important place in the history of art. This is true especially when access to original artwork has been limited. Up through the first half of the twentieth century, plaster casts made from original sculptures were used widely as study aids in museums and art academies. By mid-century, however, these casts were removed from view. In part, American museums had by then come into possession of more original work. But I would also argue that copies came to be overly devalued in relation to originals, and this was unfortunate. I am glad to hear that the Metropolitan Museum now lends its plaster cast collection out to universities here and abroad. The art museum at Fairfield University in Connecticut, for example, currently displays several Met casts on long-term loan.

In other words, the idea of us allowing "smaller, less wealthy museums" to display copies "so their publics could view first-rate rather than second-rate art" was around long before Professor Banfield made his proposal concerning art copies in the early 1980s. One could say that art-library slide collections, and before that magic lantern projections, were all copies used in much the same way as those plaster casts. The same goes today for the high resolution digital scans available through initiatives such as Google Art Project.

In all of these cases, copies serve as necessary substitutes. Their availability has been widely beneficial to a public that might not otherwise have access to great works of art. And even when originals are available, reproductions have a place, because they don't keep museum hours, and it's not always possible to lecture about art in a gallery setting.

If Professor Banfield had suggested only that second-rate museums use their limited resources to purchase copies, as Freedman suggests, I agree that would have sounded reasonable. But Banfield suggested much more in his proposal, and the art community was right to object to it.

"I go further," Banfield wrote in 1982, "Why should public museums not substitute reproductions for originals?" Kramer was therefore correct in giving the impression that Banfield advocated the wholesale deaccessioning, or selling off, of museum collections to fulfill his vision. Banfield's arguments for this were esoteric at best, nonsensical at worst, but had something to do with a desire to see the "multibillion-dollar art business . . . fall into an acute and permanent recession." Whatever the reasoning, it was an unreasonable and vastly destructive idea when Banfield proposed it. It remains so today in ideas such as the "Central Library Plan," a proposal to remove the books and gut the stacks at the main branch of the New York Public Library, which I mention in my essay.

At the heart of these ideas is both a contempt for the art-going, book-reading public and the elitist sense that they either don't deserve or cannot appreciate the real thing. "It would not be unduly cynical," Banfield wrote in 1982, "to say that many of the thousands who stood in line for a ten-second look at 'Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer,' after the Metropolitan Museum paid $6 million to acquire it, would as willingly have stood to see the $6 million in cash." Sorry, but to make such a statement is about as cynical as you can get.

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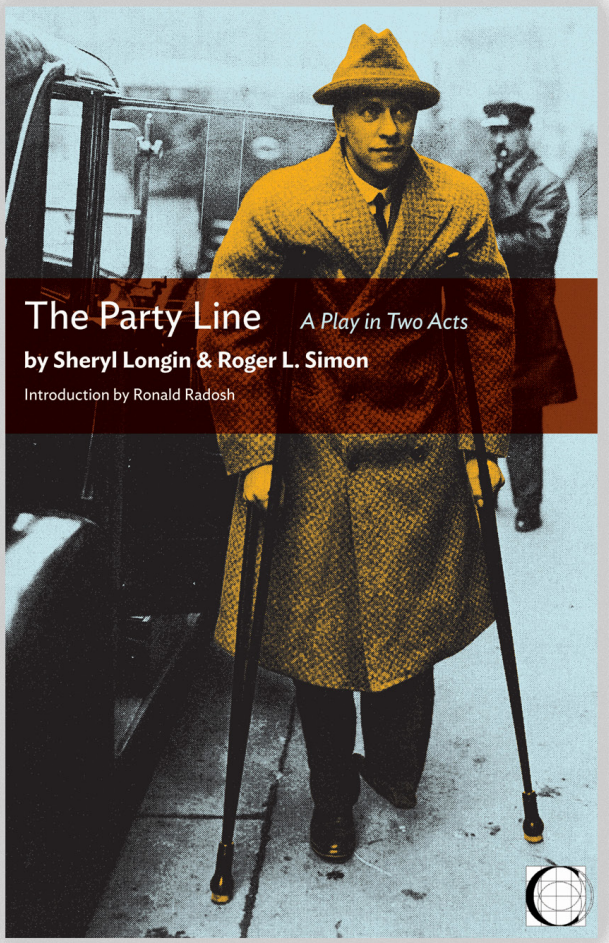

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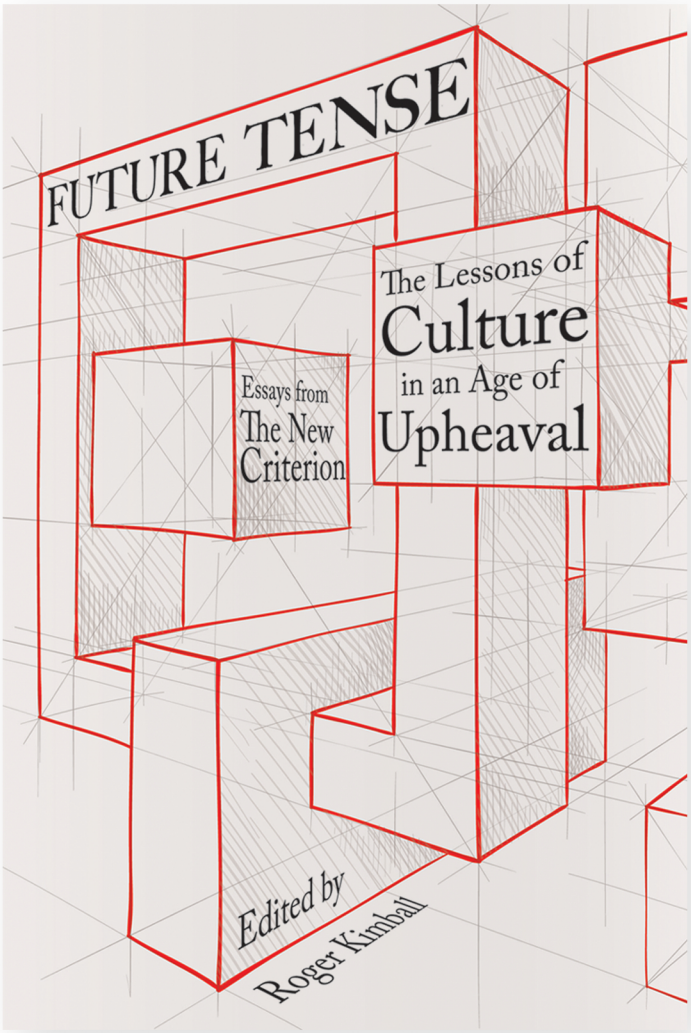

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