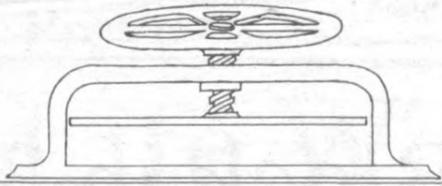


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Volume 2, Number 6

August, 1992

Ithaca, New York

COMPLIMENTARY

Dan McCall Goes to Hollywood

Take One

Jane Dickinson

Dan McCall, Cornell Professor of American Studies, is the author of nine books: seven novels and two volumes of literary criticism. Since coming to Cornell in 1966, McCall has published regularly with one book a *Literary Guild* main selection, and two novels bought by film studios. *Jack The Bear*, starring Danny DeVito, is scheduled for release in November. Triphammer is being developed at MGM.

Until recently, McCall divided his time between Ithaca and Laguna Beach where he wrote most of his earlier novels. After the death of his parents in California, he became a

full-time Ithaca resident. He has one son, Steven, a senior at Earlham College in Indiana, to whom *Jack The Bear* is dedicated. In the following interview he discusses his feelings about teaching and writing and the oddity of seeing his work transferred to the screen.

J.D. You're a writer and you're a teacher. Why do you write and why do you teach?

D.M. I can almost never do both at the same time, and that's true of most of my friends who write. Teaching is a social voice, one hopes a rational voice, a public voice. As for writing, that voice comes from somewhere else. I'm not sure it's deeper, but it's different, and it's intuitive — private rather than public. I can teach for a lot longer run than I can write; writing is so private and enclosed I can't do it for more than two months at a time without coming up for air.

J.D. From what I know of your past you've been a high achiever since you were a very young boy. How did this shape your life as a writer?

D.M. Well, it was a mixed blessing. My father wrote a speech textbook for college students in the early '40s that was the standard text in speech departments all across the country



Photo: Melinda Sue Gordon

Author Dan McCall (left) with director Marshall Herskovitz on the set of *Jack the Bear*

for two decades. Dad turned me into a public speaker, and when I was 12, I won the Optimist International Oratory contest. I loved the way my father instructed me. He'd go over and over (and my mother did this too) just the word to emphasize, where to pause, where to move, and since I was extraordinarily success-

ful, his theories did work. But I was a little confused; I didn't know if I was doing it myself or if my father was using me as a kind of guinea pig to prove his theories. It made me intensely self-conscious as a kid, and my strongest ties all through adolescence were to adults, not to friends my own age. In some ways,

I think that was a little disfiguring, emotionally.

One of the things I loved to do was a little ten-minute reading called "The Legend of Johnny Appleseed," in eleven different voices: I was an owl, a bear, a settler, an Indian, a Guardian Angel.... I was celebrat-

see *Hollywood*, page 14

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Lessons from L.A.

City Limits

William W. Goldsmith and
Rachel Maryam Muhammad

Many Americans were outraged over the unmistakably racist acquittal in May of the Los Angeles police officers charged with the brutal beating of Rodney King. There was also widespread anguish over the death, injury, and destruction from the ensuing riots in South Central Los Angeles. But we would be deceiving ourselves if we pretended that a more benign approach by police or swifter justice against brutality would be enough to prevent such outbreaks of rebellion, which are symptoms of the deep social divisions that are tearing at the fabric of American society. Cities are plagued by persistent racism, divisive patterns of suburban growth, competition from within the newly globalized economy, and the astringent selfishness of the Reagan

and Bush Administrations. These conflicts of race, place, and class are causing great damage to American cities and to the country as a whole.

I. Inequalities of Race.

The United States was founded on a racist premise of profound inequality, which has remained a deeply rooted source of social unrest. Fear, hatred and even guilt permeate the feelings of many whites toward African-Americans and other people of color. These attitudes have serious economic consequences for minorities, because they tend to reinforce institutional racism, thus further inhibiting upward mobility. Because racial discrimination is still the rule in housing and the labor market, it is much harder for minority families to find decent jobs, live in safe and well-serviced neighborhoods, for their children to attend

see *City Limits*, page 15

That Old Time Lit Crit

Mark Shechner

THE AMERICAN RELIGION:
The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation
Simon & Schuster, 288 pp., \$22.00

Harold Bloom's *The American Religion* is one of those defamiliarizing documents that takes us through the looking glass to show us our familiar reality transformed into the aqueous world of dreams. Imagine a book about religion in America in which the Catholic Church is only background and the established branches of Protestantism — Lutheran, Congregationalist, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian — are mere appendages, relics of our European heritage that have lost their clout in American life. In such a survey what could Judaism be but a footnote, the unwitting donor of *The Book* on which the new American churches have pitched their boisterous tents?

According to Bloom, the American religion is a singular

spiritual growth that took root in native soil and can trace its parentage back to a great revival meeting in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801, the Woodstock of its day, which attracted some 25,000 worshippers to a week-long inter-denominational ritual of ecstatic union. The revival of enthusiasm set loose at Cane Ridge has long since spread like kudzu into every region and locale, thrusting tendrils into the remotest corners of the landscape. Its main tributaries, its power branches, are the Mormon Church and the Southern Baptist Convention, "violent opponents of one another, yet each American to the core and neither having anything accurately in common with what historically has been considered Christianity." Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Christian Scientists, various Black churches, Baptist and Muslim, the Assemblies of God and other assorted Pentecostals, and a host of New Age ecstasies fill out the parade. "Their strong survival, despite their startling doctrines, essentially stems from

their self-concealed core of the American Religion: Orphic, Gnostic, millenarian. Other religions have promised us Eternity; only the American Religion promises what Freud tells us we cannot have: "an improved infancy," as Hart Crane called it."

The aspect of this religion that qualifies it as "post-Christian" is its Gnosticism, a term which Bloom is ever on the verge of defining. Gnosticism, derived from the Greek *gnosis* or knowing, commonly refers to the heretical Christian faiths that flourished in the Middle East in the early centuries of the common era, though as Elaine Pagels, in her book *The Gnostic Gospels*, points out, it was largely a mystical Gnosis that they specialized in. Harold Bloom is at pains to let us know that the Gnosticism he has uncovered at the core of the American religion is in no way a revival of those early faiths. Indeed, "the most Gnostic element in the American Religion is an astonishing reversal of ancient Gnos-

see *Lit Crit*, page 12

Mene, mene, tekel

Around the Writer's Block in 30 Months

Sidney Smith

In January 1991 the Writing Program in Ithaca College hired me as an instructor. Alas for the poor ladies, how little they knew what an asp they had taken to their bosom.

I was frankly glad to have the job. I had arrived in this country from Ireland three months before, and the nearest I had come to regular employment was an interview for nightwatchman in the Cargill Salt Plant, Watkins Glen. On the telephone they were offering \$4.43 an hour, rising to \$4.57 if I was good. When I walked into the hut the security lady's face fell: "No beards!"

Three days later I fell quite unexpectedly into the opening at IC.

I may mention that I had come from Ireland to live as near as possible to the children of my former marriage. At the time they were two blocks away. Now they are downstairs. The youngest is ten. If it wasn't for her I would be back in Ireland, where, as a matter of curiosity, I would be again eligible (as a member of Aosdana, an honor list of 150 writers-artists-musicians) for a \$13,000 annual stipend from the Irish Arts Council. I had if for seven years before I came, having published five books of poems, and having had eight plays staged or broadcast.

When I began at IC, I was teaching Academic Writing, under the impression that I was teaching at university level. Thirty months later, my creative capacities numbed from over-exposure to freshperson jottings cobbled in what appeared to be English as a second language, I knew better.

No textbook was available for the first three weeks, so I breezed through a survey of basic thinking and writing for freshpersons — if you can't think, you can't write, right? Then the standard textbook arrived, a collection of essays written largely in sub-standard sociologese. At the same time I got the first batch of student papers. They had at least the shine of whatever lucidity I had been able to impart. I had enough way on to sail

through the rest of the semester on my chosen course. The student evaluations were raves, mostly, and so were the peer reports, and my teaching was rated V.G., which helped towards a merit pay raise, i.e. a slightly larger ration of the peanuts that were going.

After five semesters, late April '92, the Writing Program Faculty voted me out. Official grounds: my teaching did not match the "curricular requirements" of the Pro-

litical correctness commonly referred to as "dead white European males" — minimal erudition would allow that this group includes an Indian, a Chinaperson, and an African, and even baby post-modern nihilists know that while God is dead, Nietzsche lives. The peers wondered how much the students had understood. That seemed to be the only criticism. Had they chosen to review the students' essays it would likely have emerged that they, my peers,

reasoning can ruin good causes." That clearly did it.

The subscript was elevated to headline. The Personnel Junta of the Writing Program recommended I not be rehired, and the faculty meeting lynched me. At no time was I given the opportunity to confute the mob. My student evaluations — with one exception — from for instance the two sections of personal essay I taught this last semester, thought it outrageous I should

The IC Writing Program Search Junta hired recently, for a tenured position, a PhD candidate specialising in what is vaguely termed "the emerging field of composition theory." (Like my mentor the late Iain Macdonald, MA, Fellow of Queen's, Oxford, I "prefer not to live in a field.") But given that the word has any meaning at all, the said "field" began emerging in the 5th century BC with the *Dissoi Logoi* — the original pedant Isocrates marked out a lot more of it; and by the time of Quintilian it was pretty well cleared, one would have thought. However since, to the intellectual vandals who sprang up after Flower Power went to seed, anything done by "dead white European males" is *anathema* and, if spotted roaming at large, *delenda*, they'll just have to go round the long way and invent it all again, won't they?

The Program also advertised and filled a tenured position for a teacher of poetry or fiction writing. I applied, got no interview, and when I asked why, was suavely informed that the Search Junta needed time to work out "how to deal with this kind of thing" — my query.

The fact that I am a European male white (well, pink mostly, but to the purblind simplist, white) may have something to do with all this.

Come to think of it, isn't it just as well I'm not dead too or I wouldn't even have got this far?

If they trebled my salary I'd consider reorganizing IC's Writing Program for them. I wouldn't sack them *in absentia*, or if I did I'd tell them straight away.

Part Two.

Perhaps it was not to be. Perhaps the umbrage in the subscript arose out of a text of mine, which had limited circulation, but which my betters in the Writing Program seemed not to care to know about.

In the Dublin Theatre Festival of 1989, a month prior to my arrival in this country, I put on a verse satire from which I here reproduce an

see *Writer's Block*, page 18

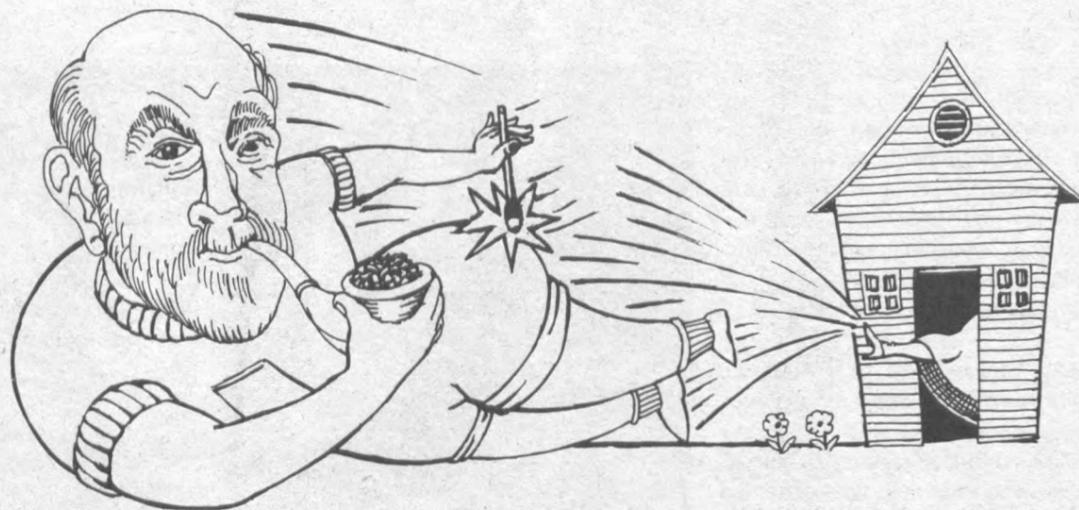


illustration: Benn T.F. Nadelman

gram; and there were questions about my "collegiality" and "service to the College."

(The latter seemed to mean sitting in a committee room long hours of a Friday afternoon listening to a load of b.s., or more properly and not to be sexist about it, c.s.; when one could have been more creatively employed sitting in the Ritz or Micawber's dispensing copious helpings of the aforesaid b.&/or c.s.)

So what happened?

For teaching Academic Writing I had unearthed a textbook — Jacobus' World of Ideas — and cleared it with my overlady, and was inflicting it on my classes. Came class visits from peers last fall, my second year review. The unit in hand dealt with philosophy. I ran, lightly enough I thought, over notions that cropped up in the Buddha, Plato, Nietzsche, Augustine, Simone Weil, Lao-tzu, and other declassified elements to which the dudes of po-

had not followed what I was saying quite as well as the students had. But they did not so choose.

So my review was rescheduled for spring '92. More peers appeared including one who I suspect had passed a remark, in my hearing — at me rather than to me — about "these ridiculous poetry writing classes," I at the time being employed to teach a section of same. This should perhaps have served as a mene-tekkel subscript-on-the-wainscot, but I blithely disregarded it — as I did the niggling criticisms in the ensuing peer reports. For instance, I had warning that any element of "performance" might incur disapproval, so I underplayed and mistimed as much as my temperament will allow — and of course was hit for lack of organization. Ah well.

The crux I think came when I referred to a poor line of thinking in an essay by a black woman writer. My brazen contention was: "bad

not be rehired.

The decision was sprung on me in the last week of the semester. More exactly, I found out about the faculty decision because I rang up to inquire.

I was to have taught Academic Writing in June as well. It took a further phone call for me to elicit the information that this was pulled too.

I should make it clear that the IC Writing Program is more or less in *pardah*. It operates independently of the English, Theatre Arts, Modern Language, or other departments which maintain a level of recognizable excellence and where I have some friends. I even have friends in the Writing Program. But clearly not enough.

So to whom it may concern: OINK. At least I got a couplet out of it:

*I love the democratic way
you hanged me in absentia.*

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Editorial Staff: Jack Goldman, Joel Ray

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Production & Design: Amy Kweskin
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Hangar Theatre Preview

Life With Mamet

Katie Johnson

"Theater is like surfing," Hangar Theatre Artistic Director Robert Moss mentions casually over coffee.

We're talking about Chicago-born playwright David Mamet and the American theater scene. The surfing metaphor escapes me.

Moss continues, waiting a beat, not unlike a Mamet pause.

"Theater is like surfing because to enjoy it one must be there, in the moment," he explains. "Nothing can replace this immediacy — it can't be captured on film or video. It is alive."

Suddenly Moss is sounding less like a surfer dude and a great deal like Mamet's theories on theater. I smile and nod. Sure. Theater is like surfing. Why not?

Moss is directing Mamet's *A Life in the Theatre* at the Hangar Theatre in Ithaca, July 29 - August 8. Unlike most of Mamet's work, which exposes the bleak, darker side of human nature, *A Life in the Theatre* is surprisingly charming and sentimental. This two-man play is a glimpse backstage at the relationship between a veteran actor in his fading role as mentor and a talented protégé — both on and off stage. With an uncharacteristic use of pastiche, Mamet sets aside his trademark cynicism and reflects fondly upon the theater. Mostly, this play shares the (often humorous) stories of the theater while it pays it tribute.

Mamet writes that "a life in the theater need not be an analogue to 'life.' It is life." Mamet has actually reworked Stanislavsky's theory that theater is a part of one's total life experience, an environment where humans interact, as actors and audience come together. Theater is not invention or make-believe. It is real.

"Precisely!" Moss agrees emphatically as we discuss this part of Mamet's essay. We're back to surfing again and I'm with him this time.

Mamet is a playwright most known for his sparse, rhythmic language and barren dialogue that probes the limitations of communication in American life. Referred to as the Aristophanes of the inarticulate, Mamet captures, as perhaps no other American modern dramatist, the colloquial speech of working-class Americans. The essence of Mamet's dialogue, however, is the way it harnesses everyday speech to a poetic rhythm. Superficially Mamet's work might appear naturalistic, but its symbolism and rhythm constitute a rich, poetic style that has become his trademark.

For example, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Mamet portrays the harsh dog-eat-dog world of four real-estate salesmen, by conveying their almost inarticulate speech in a highly stylized manner:

Aaronow: You're going to steal the leads?

Moss: Have I said that? (Pause.)

Aaronow: Are you?

Moss: Did I say that?

Aaronow: Did you talk to Graff?

Moss: Is that what I said?

Aaronow: What did he say?

Moss: What did he say? He'd buy them. (Pause)

Aaronow: You're going to steal the leads and sell the leads to him. (Pause.)

Moss: Yes.

Is it surprising that the author of the film noir *Homicide* and the caustic play *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* would write a sentimental piece like *A Life in the Theatre*? Perhaps not, but with Mamet, known for his keen cynicism, one needs to pause and consider why he abandons his darker themes to bask in the footlights. *A Life in the Theatre* stands out as a self-indulgent tribute to theater, praising an institution that has treated Mamet very well.

Yet Mamet has long been fascinated with stories of the

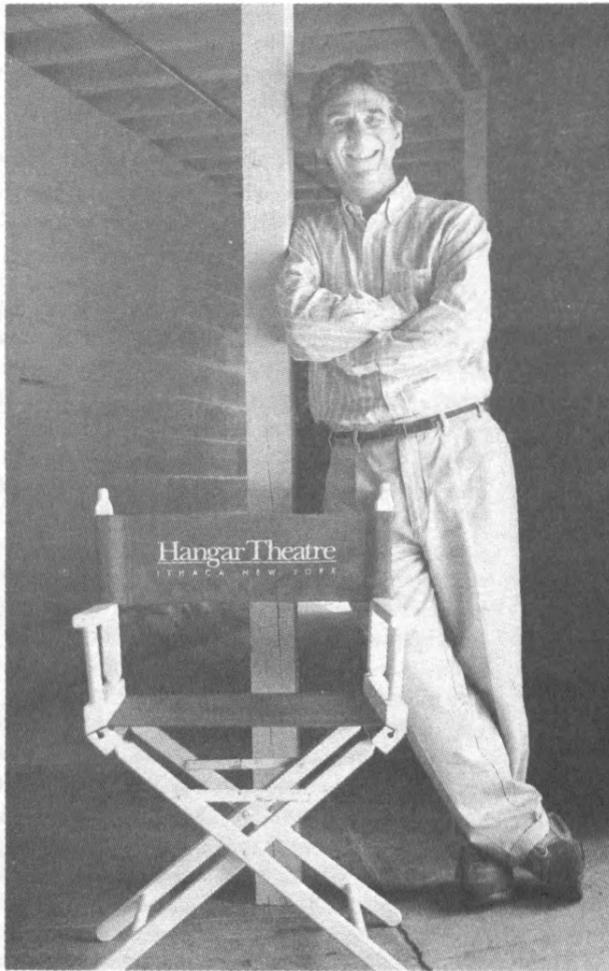


photo: Dede Hatch

Robert Moss

theater. In his collection of essays, *Writing in Restaurants*, Mamet notes:

Our theatrical drolleries, necessities, and peculiarities may be diverting to others, but they are fascinating to ourselves.... We in the theater tell stories about and on ourselves and our colleagues, and these stories are exactly the same ones Aristophanes told to and on his friends. They are attributed to different personalities, but the stories are the same. The problems and the rewards are the same.

Moss counters, "All people, not just actors, have their own stories. Anyone likes a good story." But he agrees with Mamet that there is something unique about the fascination of the theater. "Not just actors, but theater-goers as well love stories and plays about the theater."

Moss has some theater stories of his own: "My first theatrical experience was at age nine when I saw Orson Welles in *Around the World in 80 Days*. I was so moved that I decided then and there that I would put on plays for the rest of my life. And I have." Moss divulges Ethel Merman's trick of singing with a large wad of bubble gum tucked in her mouth. He remembers the first performance he staged at the Hangar when he could hear the audience hold its collective breath in the dramatic pauses of *The Rainmaker*.

Mamet argues that theater people need to tell their stories in order to substantiate their existence. Story-telling is a process of re-inventing oneself:

It is important to tell and retell stories, as the only real history of the ephemeral art is an oral history; everything fades very quickly, and the only surety is the word of someone who was there—

The primary story teller in *A Life in the Theatre* is the older actor, Robert. He constantly philosophizes about the theater

to the younger actor, John, as if to legitimize himself.

Robert: We must not be afraid to grow. We must support each other, John. This is the wondrous thing about the theatre, this potential.

John: Mmmm.

Robert: Our history goes back as far as Man's. Our aspirations in the theatre are much the same as man's. (Pause.) Don't you think?

John: Yes. (Pause.)

Robert: We are society. Keep your back straight, John. The mirror is your friend. (Pause.) For a few more years. (Pause.) What have we to fear, John, from phenomena? (Pause.) We are explorers of the soul. (Pause.)

Perhaps Mamet's unabashed sentimentality in *A Life in the Theatre* is a way for him to affirm himself. By glorifying the institution, Mamet promotes it and, by extension, himself.

But *A Life in the Theatre* is also a stylistic tour de force in which Mamet echoes and parodies well-known genres and playwrights — Chekov, Büchner, and Shakespeare, for example. These scenes include such classic stage mishaps as faulty costumes, falling scenery, and actors forgetting their lines — a veritable scrapbook of the theater. Mamet must have had the time of his life. Take this war scene, for example:

John: It's gotta rain.

Robert: Tell it to the marines.

John: If it doesn't rain, I'm going off my nut.

Robert: Just take it easy, kid...What you don't wanna do now is sweat. (Pause.) Believe me. (Pause.)

John: We're never getting out of this alive. (Pause.) Are we?

Robert: How do you want it?

John: Give it to me straight.

Robert: Kid, we haven't got a chance in hell.

By distancing these scenes as plays within the play, Mamet can get away with the corny dialogue that serves the story. In his essay, *Regarding A Life in the Theatre*, Mamet says:

My play, A Life in the Theatre, is, though I may have led you to believe otherwise, a comedy about this life.

It is an attempt to look with love at an institution we all love, The Theater, and at the only component of that institution (about whom our feelings are less simple), the men and women of the theater — the world's heartiest mayflies, whom we elect and appoint to live out our dreams upon the stage.

For Mamet, "The magic moments, the beautiful moments in the theater always come from a desire on the part of artist and audience to live in the moment — to commit themselves to time."

In his Artistic Director's Message in the Hangar Theatre playbill, Moss expresses a similar view of the importance of story in touching humanity:

I believe that since prehistoric times, at the end of the day, after the evening meal has been consumed, the community wants to gather together in the dark around the fire and listen to tales of ghosts and goblins and gods, of love and hate and revenge, of life and of death. I believe that act of listening within one's community has a special power to heal and to enrich.

According to Mamet's essays, theater can touch the heart and even inspire ethical behavior. As Mamet puts it, "Theatre is where you go to remember."

Katie Johnson is the Director of Marketing and Promotions at The Hangar Theatre in Ithaca.



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Paul West



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The Electronic Icon

Paul N. Edwards

Paul Edwards has taught in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at Cornell University. The following essay is from the introduction to his forthcoming book, "The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse," to be published by MIT Press in 1993.

The power of computers to transform complex, sophisticated techniques into everyday instruments has increasingly earned them both practical importance and social prestige. Computers have become a central feature of the American imagination, the specially American experience of reality that includes space flight, television, automobiles, and suburbia. They have long since been absorbed into the collective imagination of American culture, and — largely by consequence — into the culture of the whole developed world.

The "imagination" and "culture" I mean include not only the fantastic high-tech futures found in movies and science fiction, but also the theories, ideologies, interests, and visions that guide the construction of public policy and the understanding of science in the world of the integrated circuit. Computers were the enigmatic object of profound hopes and hatreds even before their invention in the late 1930s. From their origins they have been as much symbols as practical devices: "giant brains," standards of precision, icons of scientific values, evidence of omnipotence. Thus, I will argue, we cannot make sense of the material roles of computers as tools without simultaneously grasping their metaphorical roles in imagination and culture.

At one level, the meaning of these metaphorical roles may be sought in a historical account of the development of computers and their links with cognitive psychology and cognitive science. A new conception of psychological processes came into scientific ascendancy in the early 1950s as "cognitive" psychology. The new view opposed behaviorist emphasis on external observables and simple conditioning with complex internal-process models based on metaphors of computers and information processing. That conception evolved in a reciprocal relationship with a changing culture of subjectivity within which computers became, in Sherry Turkle's words, a "second self," one that is simultaneously decentered, fragmented, and reunified by an interactive relationship with information machines.

But to be comprehensible as a cultural history, this story needs to be nested inside another, larger narrative about the grand politics of globalist American foreign policy over the past fifty years. I believe there are strong, concrete connections between what I call the "closed world" of post-World War II American global political hegemony and the "microworlds" of computer simulations and artificial intelligence. These linkages were strongest during the two periods of cold war, roughly 1949-62 and 1978-86. In each of these periods, military priorities (shaped by a globalist foreign

policy and an evangelistic ideology, coupled with "can-do" technological prowess) played a major role in the general direction of American computer research. In turn, the development of computers — for real-time control of automated forces, as supports for large-scale modeling of military situations and world dynamics, and eventually for automatic control of "smart" and "brilliant" weapons — helped create new military capabilities, forms and locations of authority, and techniques of analysis that reinforced and empowered closed-world political thought.

The notion of a "closed world" is intended to signify a bounded mental and conceptual space. This term descends from the literary criticism of Sherman Hawkins, who uses it to define one of the major dramatic spaces in Shakespearean plays. Closed-world plays are marked by a unity of place, such as a walled city or the interior of a castle or house. Action within this space centers around attempts to invade and/or escape its boundaries. Its archetype is the siege (with the *Iliad* as original model). Its central problematic is psychological, an inward confrontation of characters with the power of rationality and restrictive social convention which, in tragedy, leads to self-destruction (e.g. Hamlet or Romeo) and in comedy to exorcism of these forces (e.g. the punishment of Jaques or Malvolio).

The alternative to the closed world is not an "open" world, but what Northrop Frye called the "green world." The green world is an unbounded natural setting — a forest, meadow, or glade. Action moves in an uninhibited flow between natural, urban, and other locations, and centers on magic (e.g. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). The green world is indeed an "open" space where the limits of rationality are transcended, but that does not mean that anything goes. Rather, the opposition is between a human-centered, inner, psychological logic and a magical, natural, transcendent one.

The "closed world" I am discussing here is a political and ideological, rather than a physical one. Post-WWII American politics, as well as those of divided Europe, were in fact dominated by the same unity of place that characterizes closed world dramas. The stage was the globe as a whole, the action one of attempts to contain, invade, escape, or explode a closed Communist world symbolized by phrases like "the Iron Curtain" and physically instantiated by the Berlin Wall. At the same time the globe itself was seen as a closed whole, a single scene in which the capitalist/communist struggle was the only activity and from which the only escape was the technological utopia of space travel. The US reconceived itself as the manager, either directly or by proxy, of the entire global political, economic, and military scene. The ideological opposition between "freedom and slavery" that justified globalism was belied by the tremendous social conformism of the 1950s and the totalizing modernist obsession with planning, rational action, Keynesian economic control, and military interventionism.

Computers played an important role in the discourse that developed around the ideology of the closed world. (A discourse is simply a language-game, in Wittgenstein's useful phrase: a language that both reflects and partly constitutes a form of life, an intertwined and interdefined set of artifacts, habits of thought, social practices, and linguistic forms.) They were a key factor in the massive increases in the speed and scale of warfare through their uses in command-and-control systems, data analysis, satellite surveillance, and from the early 1960s, as components of "smart" weapons, such as guided missiles, cruise missiles, and advanced jet aircraft. But they were also of immense symbolic and practical importance in the ideological world of the Cold War, for which they represented a potential for total oversight, exacting standards of control, and technical-rational solutions to a myriad of complex problems.

Electronic digital computers were invented in the late 1930s in the United States. Their importance and practical applications were first explored in Great Britain and America during the Second World War. The machines developed during the war were designed to solve cryptological problems and to calculate ballistics tables. After the war, military funding supported most of the significant computer research in the United States for almost two decades, until the early 1960s. The largest computer development project of that period, the SAGE continental air defense system, figured importantly in the domestic politics of nuclear weapons.

The importance of military support — both for computing and for the military as a social system — during this period is impossible to underestimate. Transistors, integrated circuits, magnetic core storage, the COBOL and JOVIAL programming languages, and the majority of the major new computers of the 1945-55 era were developed either with direct military backing or, when privately funded, with military markets in mind. Computers affected military strategy, for example through the RAND Corporation's systems analysis and General William Westmoreland's "electronic battlefield." Military computing changed US foreign policy by altering military capabilities. Military money remains the major source of support in particular research areas, such as artificial intelligence. Automation, much of it computer-related, helped change military work so that physical strength was less important, precipitating a revolutionary transition to a major female presence in the armed forces — including calls for a complete end to sex-based military classification, even for combat jobs. Yet most histories of computing treat these events as side issues, and the military as a convenient source of money with few or no ramifications for the ideas and hardware that emerged from military-funded labs.

This essay's intellectual origins lie in a long, leisurely reading of *see Electronic Icon, page 5*

Electronic Icon

continued from page 4

Douglas Hofstadter's Pulitzer prize-winning *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (1979) in the summer of 1982. That book attempts to link deep principles of computation with artistic creativity and the nature of human thought and language. The computer serves Hofstadter, a computer scientist and mathematician, as an example of a machine whose use of language goes beyond the mechanical into the realm of what might otherwise be called mental processes. The book probes the question first posed in its modern form by the British mathematician Alan Turing: are there any fundamental differences between a machine that processes not energy, but information, and a human mind? *Gödel, Escher, Bach* suggests that there are none, and tries to make that argument plausible to a non-specialist audience.

For a relatively technical tome over 800 pages in length and filled with mathematical games, the public success of *Gödel, Escher, Bach* was remarkable. It rapidly achieved a kind of cult status among young computer scientists, an aura it retains to this day. *Gödel, Escher, Bach* had obviously struck a resonant chord within a certain segment of the wider culture — mostly young, white, American men directly acquainted with computers and ideas about artificial intelligence.

In the first half of the 1980s, numerous developments in culture,

commerce, and politics signaled that this resonance was far more than an isolated phenomenon of abstract interest.

First, consider some of the films and fiction of this period. George Lucas' wildly successful *Star Wars* trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983) introduced the largest movie audiences in history to the "droids" (actually robots), C3PO and R2D2, in a blend of space opera and New Age mysticism. In Ridley Scott's critically acclaimed *Blade Runner* (1982), a sci-fi thriller set in 21st-century post-holocaust Los Angeles, a detective tracks down and kills four escaped androids whose features and abilities make them almost indistinguishable from — and in some ways superior to — their creators. *2010* (1984), the sequel to Stanley Kubrick's dark masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), explained Kubrick's killer computer HAL as the victim of mental illness caused by a Batesonian schizophrenic double bind. Walt Disney's *Tron* (1982), weak on plot but dazzling for its pioneering computer-generated landscapes and special effects, romanticized computer hackers and video gamers as anti-authoritarian cowboy heroes. *Tron* also provided a breathtaking vision of what would soon come to be called "cyberspace," a virtual world inside the computer.

Another box-office hit, *War Games* (1983), fictionalized a combination of recent factual news about teenage computer geniuses, break-

ins to unclassified Pentagon computer systems over public telephone lines by hackers using modems, spectacular computer failures in the nation's nuclear defense system, and artificial intelligence. In the *War Games* scenario, an intelligent military computer, egged on by a teenage hacker who thinks he is playing a computer game, brings NORAD nuclear forces to DEFCON 1. Another sci-fi cyborg film, *The Terminator*, based on the theme of a post-holocaust war against intelligent machines capable of taking human form, was a low-budget sleeper that became one of 1984's biggest blockbusters. Its success was such that its sequel, *Terminator 2* (1991), was the most expensive project in Hollywood history.

1984 was also the year of the appearance of William Gibson's extraordinary SF novel, *Neuromancer*, a near-future world in which emaciated, drug-powered silicon cowboys enter a global computer network in the form of a "cyberspace," a *Tron*-like virtual-reality grid-space. *Neuromancer* was the most successful work of what evolved, in the middle 1980s, into a disciplined, highly articulate school of science fiction. "Cyberpunk," as it is known, links a postmodernist aesthetic of decadence with computerization, biotechnology, multiculturalism, and a dark political future of massive urbanization and corporate hegemony. In 1986, MIT Artificial Intelligence Labora-

tory founder and AI cult hero Marvin Minsky's *The Society of Mind* — his first book for a popular audience — appeared to high-visibility reviews, media attention, and widespread critical acclaim.

In books and films like these, science fiction, cognitive science, and political reality blend together in a complex collage. A new subjectivity may be seen emerging, half-formed, in these visions, one in which artificial minds are alternately and sometimes simultaneously foreign and friendly, familiar and strange. In this mental landscape the computer creates new "virtual" worlds. Populating these worlds are companions and enemies who range along a continuum from silicon brains to humanoid mechanical robots, to cyborgs (combinations of flesh, circuitry, and machinery), to amped-up, bioengineered androids, to ordinary people with minds, senses, and reflexes augmented by "wetware" microchip implants, psychoactive drugs, and advanced prosthetics.

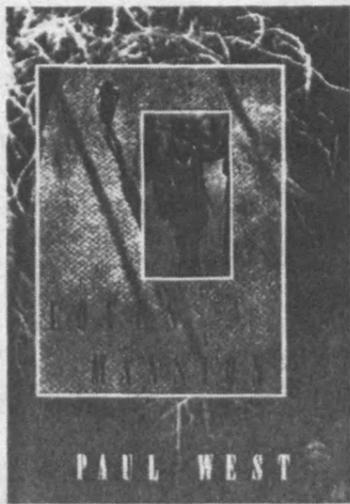
This new subjectivity is a multi-dimensional one of anxiety about boundaries and borders, of voyeuristic fears about power, love, sex, nature, and nuclear holocaust in the hands of machines. It accommodates both utopian visions of superintelligent servants and dystopic nightmares of superhuman Frankenstein's monsters in the daunting guise of Arnold Schwarzenegger. It involves funda-

mental transformations of gender identity, with troubled reconstructions of traditional relationships among rationality, intelligence, emotion, embodiment and physical strength. (*The Terminator* is largely about arming women and transforming them into soldiers in the war against machines. In *Terminator 2*, Dr. Frankenstein's monster returns as Mrs. Frankenstein's Mr. Goodbar. The formerly terrifying Schwarzenegger-cyborg is rehabilitated as the perfect father-figure, who combines superhuman physical power with total devotion to his "son" and female companion, now a buff, tough soldier of the future. *Blade Runner*, likewise, concerns itself largely with the relation between emotion and thought and embodies this puzzle in the tense, ambiguous relationship between the detective Deckard and the android Rachel.)

But this new subjectivity has also accepted the existence of a space of interaction between human minds and computerized Others. These Others, in many renderings, become simply "others" within a cultural-relativist heterotopia. In the late-1980s *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, for example, the hyperlogical Mr. Spock is replaced by the emotionless android Commander Data. The renovated starship Enterprise's computer system is an omnipresent information bank that converses with human characters in

see *Electronic Icon*, page 19

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Unearthing Antlered Poetry

Delaram Moussavi

Timothy Muskat, poet and woodsman, lives in Ithaca with his wife and son and their three dogs. He has worked as a zookeeper, tree surgeon, gardener and mountain guide, and has taught English and creative writing at Cornell University and the University of Montana. His poetry has been widely published in national magazines and journals, and has earned him numerous awards and prizes. "Murmurs from the Bogswamp's Gloaming" is his first book of poems.

D.M. You have spent considerable time in the mountains — in the White Mountains of New Hampshire when you were a boy, and later in western Montana. Are these places the terrains in your poems?

T.M. Well, I suppose I see poems as I see mountains: as living stillnesses, uneasy terrains, trackless formations one comes to and climbs and can look out from. Each of my poems is to some degree one of the many mountains I knew as a boy: I came to them because I knew they were there, that they were there for my taking, as long as I gave something of myself in return, as long as I expended something of myself in the climbing. I love mountains because they are never easy: you can't simply leap onto them, or skip to a summit. I've left a good part of myself on every mountain I've climbed, and that's the value of it for me, and the value of poetry: any poem or mountain (provided you've scaled them properly) will always take something away from you, and make you, in the process, a better person, a worthier soul.

D.M. You grew up in rustic, rural areas — in the New Hampshire woods and on a farm in Pennsylvania — and there weren't always people around. Did solitude contribute to your love of nature, your acute sense of nature's sights and sounds?

T.M. The only person I really knew as a child was my brother, and he and I were always together; and occasionally we thought we were the only kids on earth. But he was the *doer*, the naturalist, the bird-watcher; he was like Darwin to me, always discovering something and bringing it to my attention. I took mental notes. We'd find a snake in the woods, or an old antler, or a petrified cowpie in a dampened field, and my brother would tell me *what* it was: he'd classify it, file it away, put it in the shed or the fishtank. I was something of an assistant to him, a novice — and he was the *younger* one! But the fact of our always being together, and always alone, away from other kids and "culture," bred in us a respect for natural things, a partiality for them. We know the dark is more than the absence of light, for instance, because we've heard moose thundering through the blackened woods, we've heard the screech owl's cry. I have to give most of the credit to my brother, though: he identified everything we saw or smelled or took home with us. I listened to what he said, and revered him, and came to love nature by tagging along.

D.M. Do you consider yourself a nature poet?

T.M. Yes, I suppose I am, but then

I'm in good company. Whitman, Dickinson, Emerson, Stevens, Frost — weren't they all nature poets? I must say, though, the label gets to me: "nature poet" is what you're called by people who don't know what nature is, who think themselves above and beyond it, who are somehow out of sync with the world. It's easy to forget nature in this day and age — what with shopping malls and plastic bags and throwaway cars having overrun just about everything — but one has to remember: nature is the thing we come back to, the haunt we'll know when we're forced to leave the artificial places we call home. Go into the woods and find yourself a fallen tree to sit on: you'll be amazed how much of yourself nature forces you to contemplate. Do you know those wonderful opening lines from Frost's poem, "Two Tramps at Mud Time"? "Out of the mud two strangers came/ And caught me splitting wood in the yard." Well, we all came out of that mud — it's a primeval given — and it's to that mud we must return. So if I'm a nature poet it's only because I've been preparing — getting my feet dirty in readiness for the common end.

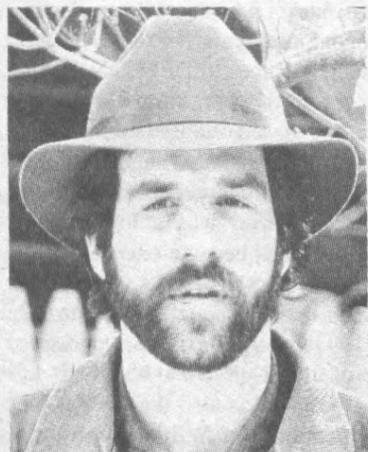
D.M. Your poetry has been compared to James Wright's and Rilke's. Who were and are your influences?

T.M. The first poet I ever *adored* was Keats, and that was not until I realized how closely I'd been reading him. His poems enticed me in part because they seemed so felt, so unafraid of feeling. Keats, of course, was doggedly hard on himself, constantly at odds with what he called the "mawkish" in his poems. But it was that mawkishness — that oversupply of emotion — that I admired, that I wanted to emulate. Reading Keats left me with the impression that the best poems are those that aren't afraid to feel, that a poet who is not afraid of making an ass of himself will usually turn out a few substantial and lasting poems. The second poet I came to know intimately was Dickinson, and she became for me a counterpoint to Keats, a medicinal tonic to his syrupy wine. What I culled from Dickinson was an impulse to measure and weigh words, to string them carefully, like beads, along a taut, metrical line. I respected Dickinson's strange solitude as well, her apprehension of company. She wasn't good with humans, and neither, I'm afraid, am I. As for Rilke, I've translated a few of his poems, and I think the *Duino Elegies* one of the finest examples of poetic feeling I've come across. Something of Rilke's phrasing may have crept into my work as a result of the translation, but I wasn't conscious of it. James Wright's work I've only recently come to know, and I must say I'm flattered by the comparison.

D.M. How do you compose? Do you have any peculiar writing habits? Superstitions? Do form and music work themselves in during the later stages of your writing? Is poetic expression a necessity, a part of your being and well-being?

T.M. I probably *decompose*, if that's possible. Most of the poems that come to me — and most of the things I consciously bring to my poetry — undergo a kind of mulchpile experience, a slow pro-

cess of decay and fermentation — otherwise I can't use them. So many of the poems began as little noises in my ear and developed gradually — how, I don't know — into lines and finally into more formal shapes and configurations. I don't write terribly often, but when I do come to the blank page I write feverishly, some-



times for several days at a stretch, and often to the point of exhaustion. When I'm writing, though, I'm writing down what I've been listening to for some time, so I never feel as though I'm groping or guessing or making stabs in the dark. I wasn't blessed with a quick mind — the inside of my head is a veritable dungheap, believe me — so I have to watch my step; I have to pick and choose. I've learned to be patient with my poems, so as to not force them into things they can't be. I've never been overly concerned with the form of a poem, if only because a poem seems to know what suits it best. I do my best not to interfere with those decisions the poem seems quite capable of making on its own. I can tell, of course, when the form isn't right; when it doesn't fit the poem or when the poem doesn't fill it, and then I tinker. But most of the time I'm simply letting the poem filter through me and onto the page. Are poems a part of my well-being? Do you mean would I perish without them? Well, I don't know how crucial they are to my survival — to my living day to day — but I wouldn't want to imagine myself without the barest means of expression. Poems allow me to say what I could probably say, in the final analysis, to no one but myself. Poems legitimize experience, no matter how sordid or unconventional; they take down — and tolerate — the wildest confession, the thorniest truth. I prefer them to priests and fathers.

D.M. You have taught undergraduate writing workshops, both at the University of Montana and at Cornell, for ten years now. How do you impart the poetic process? Has teaching affected your writing?

T.M. Before you let me answer that one, you should probably first ask a few of my former students about me. I will say, though, that I don't teach poetry: I teach respect for it, and by that I don't mean I stand over my students with a ruler and broom handle and say, Kneel! I simply try to show them that poetry has a rightful place in the world, and a rightful place in them; that it's as solid and dependable as a good walking stick, as necessary as air and water. I try to dispel the notion of the poet as melancholy moon-gazer or raving lunatic; I want my students to know how tangible and rewarding poetry can

be. For me, what you call "poetic process" is really no more than learning to take the bull by the horns, learning how to ride it and how to take a fall. It's vocational avocation, work you want and need to do. So I say to my students — Be poets! — and then I watch them from the sidelines and offer whatever encouragement and healthy criticism I can. I think teaching has affected my writing, in that it has made me a little more self-conscious — more cautious — than I used to be. I find I'm always looking over my own shoulder, doubting my best instincts, meddling in a poem where I have no right to meddle. I like teaching, but I'm not sure one's poetry is nurtured by it. I for one need an occasional stint in the outdoors, away from everyone and far from the classroom, if only to get back in touch with the things I know.

D.M. In your book, *Murmurs from the Bogswamp's Gloaming*, a number of the poems consider and address sound, the sounds your ear takes in and the sounds poetry "makes." You have written elsewhere that "poetry is a hopeful stab at truth: the voice of newness and difference singing in the charred and blackened forest after the fire... a drawing out of secrets, a constant knocking at the door, [sometimes] an unwanted child of fear." I'm curious: are you an active or passive participant in this process?

T.M. I'm both. I'm always listening for poems, for sounds I might make into poems, just as one might listen for shifts in the wind or for a certain bird song. Nature's a good place for poetry, a good place to set up camp. But nature doesn't always give you poems — just as, on a certain day, you might not catch sight of a Swainson's thrush or a Canada jay. Sure, poets are makers, but I think very often the best poetry comes to us when we least expect it, when *making* poetry is the farthest thing from our minds. I work with what I'm given, with what I discover or happen upon, whether it's that forest floor after a fire or an unexpected knock at the cabin door. I guess what I'm trying to suggest by this overweening ramble is that poetry isn't as cut-and-dried as we'd like it to be: words aren't simply pieces of kindling you gather up and toss on the fire. You've got to respect them, and give them space. It's as Wordsworth says: there's a blessing in that gentle breeze — and some of us are lucky enough to be touched by it once and awhile. Poetry could leave me tomorrow, drop entirely out of my hearing. I'm not looking forward to its departure, of course, but I've steeled myself for the possibility.

D.M. Denise Levertov says that during the process of writing poems "ear and eye, intellect and passion interrelate more subtly than at other times" and that "rhyme, chime, echo, and reiteration... not only serve to knit the elements of an experience but often are the very means, the sole means, by which the density of texture and the returning or circling of perception can be transmuted into language, apperceived." How important is form in the sense that a poem is not just what is said, but how it is expressed?

T.M. It seems to be that Levertov is

merely acknowledging, albeit in a rather circumlocutory manner, the sheer power of language — its ability to *become* the experience it describes. I think all poems (at least the poems I treasure) are perfectly formed, seamless, as neat and unquestionable as the scales on a fish. Take two poems about a similar experience — say, a walk in the country. The better poem, to my eye and ear, will always be the one that's better formed, that's *formally* more true — no matter how lovely the landscape. Poems, in the end, aren't really about anything — or rather, they're all about the same thing: language. Poets write because they enjoy tracking language down in interminable paths; they like "knitting" words together and watching them unravel in unexpected ways; they like playing with words which for others may be little more than functional terms. Often an experience becomes a poetic experience, because the poet has had the temerity and the wherewithal to go hunting for language. Luck and sharp arrows help, too.

D.M. You have an eye and an ear for detail. Your poems are so crafted, so carefully particular. How extensively do you re-work them? To what do you attribute your accuracy with words and naming?

T.M. I think I'm probably a little obsessive with my poetry, a little too concerned that words fall into exact places and produce exact sounds, and that's probably the result of having grown up in a family of architects. But I do think we owe to poems the kind of credence and devotion we owe to everything we love, including our fellow human beings. My father stressed a certain reverence for things, a *care*, and I can remember admiring the way he'd line up all his pens, color by color by color, on the top of his dresser after work. Heck, he'd wear a pair of shoes for ten years, and they always looked brand new — or at least perfectly worn. My grandfather kept a hundred-foot-long, ten-foot-high beech hedge perfectly trimmed and level for twenty years, with little more than a ladder and hand shears. So I try to bring to my poems the same care and concern my father showed for his shoes and his pens, the same devotion my grandfather brought to that hedge. I put some of my poems through countless minor revisions — I write them out, long-hand, again and again on sheets of onion skin paper — but I'm always amazed by how closely the finished product resembles the initial letting-out. I seem to know what I'm looking for; it just takes me longer than most to discover exactly what it is.

D.M. Levertov hails "the splendor of the authentic," which you seem to articulate and preserve. Yet your images are mysterious, sepulchral; you explore the uncommon origins of what's common. How important is the image in poetry for you?

T.M. I think it's everything. The image is the backbone of poetry, the goading spur; it's what makes poetry, poetry. Robert Bly says the image moistens the poem with certain energies that do not flow from a source in our personal life. I'll buy that. The image is a means of leading one to newness, or to the most ancient

Feeling for Solid Ground

Delaram Moussavi

MURMURS FROM THE BOGSWAMP'S GLOAMING

by Timothy Muskat
Grapevine Press, \$5.95 paper

The fruition of beauty is no chance of hit or miss... it is inevitable as life... it is exact and plumb as gravitation. From the eyesight proceeds another eyesight and from the hearing proceeds another hearing and from the voice proceeds another voice eternally curious of the harmony of things with man.... This is the reason that about the proper expression of beauty there is precision and balance.

— Walt Whitman, from the Preface of *Leaves of Grass*

In Timothy Muskat's *Murmurs from the Bogswamp's Gloaming*, exactitude of thought and language make for consistently tight, beautifully formed poems. From the simple narrative of "The Dreaming Dog" to the complex motions of "The Elliptical Nature of Poetry," Muskat's hard, measured details grow out of—and outgrow—their place in the everyday scheme of things; ordinary life is transformed, places made new by minute inspections and overturnings. The language of these poems reaches out for a picture of the world and preserves natural form against the threat of formlessness, the unknown. This poet is both a visionary and meticulous namer of things as they are.

In the declaratory "I Say," the speaker at the outset insists on a new order of things: a poem is an antlered creature, a strange and lusty half-buck that comes to life in "thunderous" woods, and tempts the poet-hunter to track it down.

I say a poem in the rutting season
Is a cankerous beast, its quillsharp

Antlers stabbing the whiteness
For fluxing and sound, culling the invisible

For tremors: the darkness unfurls
Afflictions of music, hoof-beats

Against rock, or the confluent
Motion of the streambed disturbed.

The image is precise, but Muskat's words are tricky, tremulous; his metaphors convey mysterious meanings which lead us to rethink — reimagine — the hooved creature. It is buck, of course, and more than buck. The magnified "hoof-beats" force us to contemplate the movements and sounds that are parts of our world and ultimately of us. In Muskat's poetry, things are never exanimate. Language is an attempt to capture, a shot at vision: "a word is an arrow flung helpless/ At an image, an indecipherable *twang*/ For sight." In the thick of the poem, the workings of language and poetry imitate and echo natural processes, and yet go beyond them. A "scrawnyboned hawk geocentric/ Circling" is, for the poet, the "rhythm & syntax/ Of everything omenic"; leaves in the forest turn, as they fall from the end of a line, into "lines uncurling to twin necessities/ Gravity and death"; the woods are "a chamber of unseeable pitch, a matting of thunderous timber" — dark, dense, full of sound and possibility.

In Muskat's poetry, the uncontrollable or seemingly ineffable is articulated through familiar things — a wounded goshawk, a rotting log, a plow horse, a field of cows. His deep, active knowledge of the wilderness guides us to distinct images, distinguishing forms we have never bothered to name before. The natural is Muskat's natural medium: he leads us to his phantasmic visions by shaping the intricacies of the outside world, the miracle of its forms.

MURMURS FROM THE BOGSWAMP'S GLOAMING

Poems by
Timothy Muskat



The wellspring for all of Muskat's poems is feeling. "Soliloquy Beneath the Night" tells the story of love and love's failings, of a doghouse and fence the poet and his lover have been "busy" building. Early one morning, while his lover sleeps, the poet looks out into "the dregs/ Of a gray dawn," where he seems to see the doghouse

Uproot itself & disintegrate, & the fence
Bank up against the windy pines
& fall,
& lock with gnarling roots

see *Solid Ground*, page 18

Prodigal Daughter

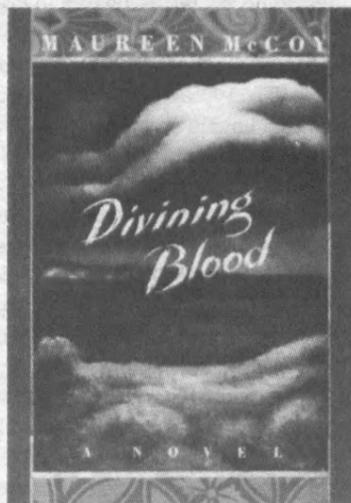
Jeanne Mackin

DIVINING BLOOD

by Maureen McCoy
Poseidon Press, 1992, 269 pp.,
\$20.00

The return of the prodigal son is one of the richest themes available to writers, and it has been amply and well used. What is rare, though, is to find this motif well employed to describe the circumstances of a female life — which is what Maureen McCoy has done in her latest novel, *Divining Blood*.

Delana Walsh ran away from home when she was seventeen. As this novel opens, she is twenty-four and returning back home, towing with her a baby, a lover, and the entire crew of a riverboat. There are



questions to be answered, problems to be set straight, and a few days on land, complete with a few minor miracles, are what's called for.

The major problem facing Delana is that while her lover is eager to marry her, he will not leave the river. She doesn't want a thirty-days-on-thirty-days-off man, which is what a riverman's land schedule is, and she can't stay on the river with her baby.

A mother's death, a father's inscrutable love, a mystic sister's wish to speak in tongues, are all part of the puzzle and solution that ravel through this playful and astonishing novel. There is rich material here, and it is extraordinarily well used by McCoy.

One of the author's talents is an ability to play language like an instrument, setting up rhythms and beats and cadences with the assurance of a virtuoso. Like the plot and the Mississippi itself, the language

flows steadily forward, but roguishly pauses sometimes to backtrack, whirl, and eddy before proceeding. McCoy's command of language combines with an unerring eye for color and detail:

And on the streets came freedom, all jewelry and charms worn in full view, tickets and luggage in hand — dreams laid out like a deck of cards. Lots of river rats moving along jaunty, looking far down the road. In their minds they gauged invisible tides. Men wore pants tight enough to get them killed outside the parish. Women laughed, resplendent in maroon. Delana wound a bright turban to her head, and her hair flew back in licorice whips. Out walking, people would call "Hey, Swami." And she loved the knowledge that she fit. She loved the gassy

exhaust of the Desire Street bus, which stopped at the corner, took coin and disgorged people all the same, as if passion had nothing at all to do with staying alive.

There's magic at work here, the abracadabra of a writer who pilots words and rhythm with the same assurance that Delana has learned to pilot a riverboat, steering clear of shallows.

If anything, the novel veers on being too eager to bewitch and too insistent on calling into play every possible symmetry and event that can add weight to an already substantial story. But McCoy has added an impressive and beguiling contribution to the prodigal child theme, one that assures that when her fourth novel is ready her readers will be waiting for it.

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Interview with Elizabeth Graver

Vision and Revision

Susan Gilmore

Elizabeth Graver has been living in Ithaca for the past two years, teaching writing and working toward a Ph.D. in English at Cornell University. She recently received a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship and will be spending the coming year in Boston researching and completing her first novel.

S.G. Could you describe your novel, briefly?

E.G. Sure. It's set in 19th-century New England in a combination of a rural farm town and Lowell, Massachusetts, which was the first industrial town in America, really—there were textile mills there. It's narrated in the voice of an old woman who is living alone on the edge of a bog. And you don't really know, in the beginning, why she's there. It's the story of her life and how she got there and also her adolescence, part of which was spent working in Lowell.

S.G. Is she living on a cranberry bog or just a bog bog?

E.G. No, it's just a bog. It's not by the ocean. It might be a cauldron bog or a quaking bog—I have to do a little bit more research. But there are all sorts of good bogs!

S.G. What's it like to be working on your first novel? Does it feel like a rite of passage? Is it daunting? Liberating?

E.G. It's scary in that you invest such a huge amount of time without having any assurance that it will come out the way you want it to. A story, if you feel like it's a disaster, you can throw away and have wasted a day. This is scarier in terms of that: you have to have more faith over time. On the other hand, I also love having it in the back of my head all the time. I think I would have been much more frustrated this year, when I've had so little time to write, if I'd been working on stories, because for me they don't percolate in a long-term way—in the same way that the novel does.

S.G. How long has your novel been in the planning? Did the idea for it announce the form it would take?

E.G. I wrote it as a story, actually, and I wrote it in the strangest way. I was house-sitting in Vermont for the entire summer—I didn't have to pay any rent. It was in the middle of the country, perfect situation, so of course I wasn't writing at all. One day I turned on PBS in the middle of the day and caught the end of something about the Lowell factory workers and in a rush wrote a twenty-two page story which in some ways is my entire novel—scrunched up very tightly! And then I thought, "this is ridiculous, this isn't a story!" and got interested in reading and went to Lowell, which has a very good historical society, and the whole thing got much bigger. I still don't know exactly what form the novel will take. It's getting a little more disorderly as it goes. Partly because I'm doing so much research, I'm finding out things I didn't know as I go along. So my character is moving in ways I didn't anticipate and I'm learning more about the

period, which I find really exciting—that mixture of learning actual facts and seeing where your character's going to lead you. It gives me much more to work with. S.G. Do you find yourself working with outlines or in a different mode than when writing short fiction? It sounds like, on the one hand, you



photo: Kim Dionis

have a lot of facts but, on the other hand, there's more room for things to evolve than in a short story.

E.G. There definitely is more room: you can veer off and spend more time in places. I'm not working with outlines, although I think I know the last line.

S.G. And you're gathering substantial background information for accuracy?

E.G. Sort of accuracy, although I'm not trying to write an artifact. I'm not at all trying to write something that people would look at and think "Oh, this was written in the 19th century." I'm more interested in imagining myself into somebody from that period but allowing her to say things that she probably wouldn't have said.

S.G. Is that your feminism coming through?

E.G. I guess, although I didn't start out thinking of it in that way. But yes, she talks a lot about her body and sexuality and desire in ways that seem to me to be present in undercurrents in a lot of writing from that period by women that I've read but that is never remotely as explicit as my narrator. I'm assuming that, even if their thoughts weren't articulated in the way we would articulate them now, 19th-century women would have had sexuality and desire.

S.G. As a reader, I often believe in characters so strongly that I'm sorry to see their stories end—it's my yearning for the next chapter. Do you find yourself feeling this way as you conclude a story? Is it part of what directs you to the novel as a more expansive form?

E.G. In a way I feel like all my characters are the same character, so every time I start something it's bringing up a lot of the same issues. It probably has more to do with a

desire to create a more complex, bigger world and to deal with wider periods of time and to follow somebody through a process, because almost all of my stories really are very small in terms of where they are and in terms of the amount of time in someone's life that they follow. I wanted to be able to push farther

you just don't see in that thematic way—or I didn't. He also was merciless about saying "this character's a stereotype, this character's a bore, this character feels sorry for herself." It made it hard to work with him in that he would not put up with anything he didn't like, but I think he was also a really good teacher.

S.G. You received your M.F.A. from Washington University in St. Louis. What did you gain from the workshop experience?

E.G. I'm skeptical of anybody thinking they can learn how to write in a workshop, but I think that the time and, potentially, the community that it provides can be helpful. I wrote my entire collection during my M.F.A. It was an incredibly productive period for me. After being a high-school teacher and a secretary for two years, that time seemed enormous—like this huge gift. If somebody had wanted to give me ten thousand dollars a year and said "go write," I might have arrived at the same point, especially because I've had a writing group since 1986 which functions as a sort of wonderful workshop for me. They've been the steadiest readers I've had and have nothing to do with any institution, which I prefer.

S.G. Do you find writing and teaching complementary activities?

E.G. I love teaching. I don't know whether it's complementary to my writing but it's certainly complementary to my life as a writer in that I'm basically a social person and I would find sitting alone by myself all day every day intolerable. I really like having a chance to be in a room with fifteen people for a couple of months. Originally I thought I wouldn't because I'm also pretty shy, in terms of being with groups, but, in fact, I've liked it a lot. I do think it's a good thing for students to take a creative writing class. A lot of the educational structure that they move through is so structured and so disciplined and, especially for science students, so geared toward the right answer and the right way to move through things. One of the things I emphasized in my class was how creative writing, for me anyway, is a very strange combination of needing to be extremely open to anything that comes along and not having all sorts of rigid plans and, at the same time, being able to revise like mad—being very disciplined. That strange mixture of looseness and rigor is important. My students

would come in and say, "Do we need outlines?" and "Don't we need to figure out what's going to happen exactly next?" and I'd say, "Well, you can if you want to, but that's not how I work." For me that's sort of like filling in a paint-by-numbers picture and it's boring, but, at the same time, I don't think you can just vomit out onto the page and expect it to be good. Some people can, but most of us can't!

S.G. Did you write as a child?

E.G. I wrote a lot—probably from very early on, I wanted to be a writer. My mother has boxes of little illustrated stories tied together with green yarn. And most of them were, when I look back, very imitative—you could tell what I was reading when I wrote them. They were very "genre": I wrote mystery stories or young-unknown-girl-turns-into-duchess stories. A lot of them make the present feminist in me cringe.

S.G. In your story "The Blue Hour," her caretakers find the hospitalized Mrs. Haven's jokes morbid. How do you see humor functioning in your stories?

E.G. I love it when people laugh. When I read "Have You Seen Me?" some audiences have laughed a lot and other audiences have been completely stone-faced, and I can't figure out if it's my tone or if people are reacting differently or if that story makes people uncomfortable so they won't laugh.

S.G. Or if people are laughing because they're uncomfortable.

E.G. Right, I've definitely noticed that. People have said to me "Your book is so sad. Why don't you write happier stories?" Wait till you see my novel! In general my characters are probably lonelier than I am, although I definitely have moments of their loneliness that allow me to write them. To me, the fact that the characters are engaged in a world, whether it's a real world or an imaginative world, and the fact that they're reacting and interacting makes it not seem so sad.

S.G. The characters in *Have You Seen Me?* seem distrustful of the world around them yet profoundly hopeful in their attempts to overcome barriers and visualize change, if only in the smallest and most secretive terms. Does this seem paradoxical to you?

E.G. I think it's a nice description. I suppose it's paradoxical, but it doesn't seem impossible either.

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The Eyes Have it

Susan Gilmore

Have You Seen Me?

by Elizabeth Graver
University of Pittsburgh Press, 170 pp., \$17.95

Winner of the 1991 Drue Heinz Literature Prize, Elizabeth Graver's *Have You Seen Me?* is a poetic and compelling collection of ten short stories. Though they range geographically from the Ozarks and the Maine coast to the catacombs of Paris, these stories concern themselves as much with inner landscapes. Graver's protagonists are outsiders, the worlds they inhabit often terrifying yet seductive. Ultimately, it is their desire to see and to be seen that enables these characters to resist retreat and relocate themselves in a community of others.

Over tea in my kitchen, I find Graver to be a candid but careful speaker, attuned to irony and reluctant to generalize about the writing of fiction. Instead, she avidly relates her preference for "describing the world through a very idiosyncratic angle of vision. I'm more interested in how one individual consciousness sees than in a kind of bird's-eye view." Graver's stories are intimately conceived, narrated in the first and what she terms the "close third" person ("as opposed to omniscient third"). Responding to my observation that these narrators and near-narrators tend to be either children or adolescents, Graver explains her choice: "What I'm so interested in, over and over again, tends to be characters' relationships to their own imaginations or to their inner worlds, and the very old and the very young tend to live in those worlds more intensely."

Such is the case for Simon, whose intense childhood relationship with his mother is the subject of "The Body Shop." Selected for *The Best American Short Stories 1991*, "The Body Shop" opens with the startling reminiscence "My mother had me sort the eyes" and recalls Simon's fascination with his industrious single mother's mannequin refurbishing business. The experience of witnessing his mother's creativity and her compromises marks Simon indelibly:

"Get behind the ears, Simon," she told me as I stroked on paint.

"Between the fingers, in the cracks." She mixed the sample flesh tones on an artist's palette, adding purples, greens—garish colors I couldn't imagine would transform into skin. And yet everything grew younger around my mother—the sallow became rich, the chipped became whole. Dull painted eyes were cut out with a razor and replaced with lambent glass ones; suddenly it was hard to stare back. Ten years old, I spent my afternoons tracing the facets of the body. Later, when I slowly began to encounter real flesh, the girls and women seemed off to me for a long time, too wide, too soft, all excess, evasion, and shifting eyes.

For the protagonist of "Around

nates with the image of "Trance," a snake for whom Hannah feels an affinity. Hannah envies Trance's tightly-coiled predatory power but yearns to break free of her own confining brace and ambivalence. "Tall and brawny," Jacob's body comes to her "like a possibility that could rub off, a bit of borrowed ease." In imagining Jacob's aspirations, Hannah envisions her own transcendent flight: she visualizes "touching fingers with a ring of bundled astronauts"—a ring far more expansive and communal than Trance's constricting coils.

The characters in *Have You Seen Me?* are loners craving contact. They engage in relationships whose terms are rich and mutable and whose lines

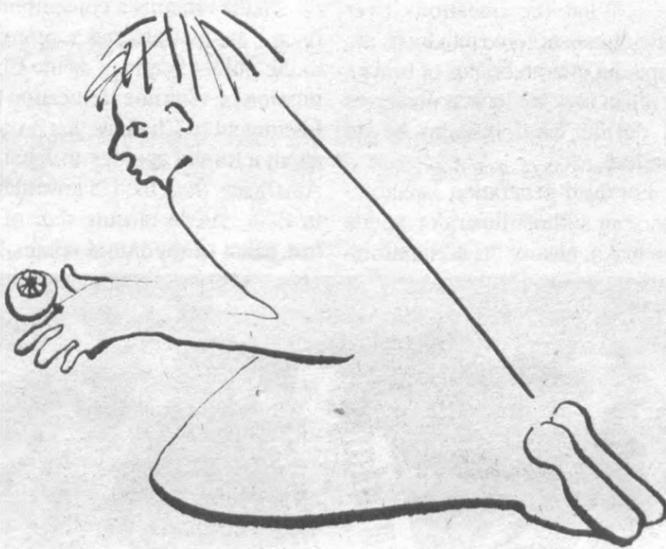


illustration: Joanna Sheldon

the World," the struggle is to determine just how formative the accidents of youth and the limits of the body will be. Hannah is a promising young woman whose mysterious injury at a high school square dance has left her fragile, self-protective, and withdrawn. Hannah spends her days feeding the animals in "the tiny zoological museum" of a local college, her solitude broken only by brief visits from Jacob, the young custodian, and from a troop of petulant Brownies.

Image is central to Graver's work, and in "Around the World," she employs a series of visual motifs to trace Hannah's psychic transformations. The circular dance step which causes Hannah to recoil reso-

of sight are always subject to reversals. In "The Blue Hour," an elderly lesbian thinks of her nurse as both a daughter and a lover. In "Yellow Tent," a teenage boy's crush on his older cousin is exacerbated by a camping trip she initiates to escape her marriage. With evident amusement, Graver describes this scenario's reception: "Angela Carter, one of my favorite writers, was my teacher at Washington University. 'Yellow Tent' came up in workshop and someone called it a story about incest, and Carter said 'this isn't a story about incest—that's such an ugly word. Let's call it a story about transgression!' which I loved." In "Yellow Tent," sexual transgression is inextricable from

transgressions of the gaze: the cousins Darren and Meg find themselves fighting for control over a flashlight and the scrutinizing beam it casts.

Nowhere is the intimacy of vision more foregrounded than in the title story. "Have You Seen Me?" features eleven-year-old Willa, whose activist mother stores away gallons of soup in milk cartons in case of a nuclear emergency. Willa is obsessed with the missing children whose photographs adorn the cartons; she catalogues them by age and stores the cartons in the freezer "in pairs so they could have staring contests when she shut the door." When a woman arrives to take a drawing lesson from Willa's mother, Willa finds herself babysitting a toddler who bears an uncanny resemblance to one of the missing children. Willa incorporates the boy into a network of missing children she imagines tunneling, insect-like, underground. At first his reluctant caretaker and observer, Willa needs "Jo-Jo" and comes to cast him as a seer: she imagines him guiding her away from an adult world of hazards and betrayals "far from the silos, deep into the insulated center of the earth."

Willa is a survivor; she derives her tenacity, in part, from her ability to fabricate. As Graver puts it, "Part of what Willa does in that story is she takes everything that's supposed to be 'bad' or damaging or difficult and turns it on its head; she takes things like the soup her mother makes, which is a real portent of disaster, and the child, who is fairly helpless, and manages to find in these things a means of making it through things that terrify her."

Though they share Willa's resourcefulness, some of Graver's characters find language's conjuring power more fearful. In "Music for Four Doors," nine-months pregnant Carlotta tries not to think bad thoughts for fear she will again miscarry. The unnamed protagonist of "The Boy Who Fell Forty Feet" finds such superstitions disturbing yet exhilarating. His father's terminal illness precipitates his discovery of storytelling; he tests his ability to cope with the eventual loss of a parent by telling strangers his father has already died.

As these would-be narrators discover, however, the fictitiousness of fiction leads to inevitable distur-

tion and loss. Naomi preempts her speculations concerning Aunt Elsie's happiness in "Scraps." Feeling she has been false to her subject, Naomi turns her gaze inward instead: "What did I know about my boyfriend's aunt—how she slept, how she viewed the objects on her shelves? What did I know about my boyfriend? Such gall, such cockeyed innocence . . ."

In Naomi's predicament, Graver sees her own reluctance to write about the people close to her: "People are so complicated. No matter how well you know them, so much of any person is going to show up in glimpses or not at all that making assumptions about somebody else's happiness or well-being or loneliness is a risky thing, because you never can quite grasp it all."

Yet in fiction, Graver's characters discern truths they could in no other way grasp. In "The Experimental Forest," the "troubled land" zoned for a government study on tree viruses becomes the site of the teenage narrator's first sexual experimentation. To an appealing forest worker named Pete, fourteen-year-old Kelly lies about her age and claims to be her baby sister's mother. Kelly learns that the lies she constructs around the infant she must care for daily describe her identity more accurately than she would have presumed:

"I hate her," I said, looking down at Addie, but there she was, fast asleep, and I knew that no matter what I said, really she was mine, and that when she was grown and thought back, however vaguely, to her dim beginnings, it would be my arms she would feel carrying her through the poplar trees. That when she lifted her mouth and made sucking motions like a fish, I was the body she was gasping for, my tiny, milkless breasts.

Have You Seen Me? is a book of acute vision and compassion. Searching deep within themselves, Graver's subjects find the means to reach out. In tracing their longings, Graver weaves a community that resounds long after these separate stories conclude.

Susan Gilmore received her M.F.A. in poetry and is currently completing a Ph.D. on modernist women poets at Cornell University.

AUTHOR PHOTOS



Patty Dan, author Mermaids
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Children's Books:



Syracuse Multicultural Conference

Teresa Demo

"Of course I am a unicorn," the marvelous creature said, "Haven't you ever seen a unicorn?"

Alice answered, "When I was a little girl I was always told that unicorns were mythological creatures. I didn't think they were real."

The unicorn responded, "When I was a small unicorn I was told stories about little girls and thought they were fictional."

— Alice meeting the Unicorn from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as told by Jamaka Highwater.

Jamaka Highwater observed how language that associates the "word 'dirt' with the word 'soil,'" implying "a lack of cleanliness," affects the beliefs of a people who spell "Earth" with a capital letter. Walter Dean Myers wondered aloud about what prevented him in his youth from going to jail like so many of the young black men he has interviewed in upstate prisons. Nicholasa Mohr read the answer from Abuelita to her granddaughter in her book *Felita*:

You can be prepared for the future...When anyone gives you a hard time about the way your family looks, let them know that Puerto Ricans are part of all the different races on this earth - just like the many flowers of one garden. And when these ignoramus criticize you because you use Spanish words, remember this already makes you twice as smart as people who only speak one language. Finally, when anyone tells you "You don't belong here," tell them you are an American citizen. But the most important thing is for you to remember that everyone can feel sorrow or be hurt by others. We all share the same basic feelings and wants.

Sheila Hamanaka recalled that the US president responsible for ushering in "The New Deal" was also the one who issued "Executive Order 9066," sending Japanese Americans to "relocation centers" during World War II. And Vera B. Williams dedicated the reading of her 1990 Caldecott Honor Award book, *More, More, More* Said The Baby, to "Rodney King and everyone like him."

These were the voices of distinguished children's book authors seeking to tell some of the unheard stories of America at the 26th annual Spring Media Conference, held in Syracuse on April 30th and May 1st. Their remarks, illustrating the conference theme of "Celebrating Cultural Diversity," were delivered the morning after the Rodney King verdict sent LA into flames, reminding us of the forgotten words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that "a riot is the language of the unheard."

The annual conference seeks to

provide an educational forum for current issues in literature and curriculum for children; it is co-sponsored by the School of Information Studies, Syracuse University; Central New York Library Resources Council; Syracuse City School Library System; Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES, School Library System; and Onondaga County Public Library. This year, over 290 educators came to explore the meaning and the importance of "multiculturalism" in the classroom. These are the teachers, librarians, and administrators for whom the political debate over multicultural curriculum implementation means the daily task of working with children of many colors and many backgrounds who need to feel a reason and a way to belong. Syracuse University professor Sari Feldman opened the sessions: "We are here today to celebrate the power of word and picture; it is our opportunity and responsibility to bring this world to children."

Multiculturalism in school curricula received considerable attention last summer when the report, "One Nation, Many Peoples; A Declaration of Cultural Interdependence," emerged from the twenty-four member committee appointed by New York's Commissioner of Education Thomas Sobol to review and to recommend change in the teaching of Social Studies in public schools. "No one," said committee member Nathan Glazer of Harvard University, "argues with a curriculum that gives proper weight to the role of American Indians, Blacks, Asians, and European immigrants and ethnic groups in American history." In fact, elements of such multicultural study already exist in the schools; the real debate is over the design of the new proposals and how they are to be implemented.

Many say that projected demographic statistics clearly indicate the necessary direction; for example, by the year 2000, Hispanics will be the largest minority group in America. Some educators, pointing to the pattern of poor achievement among blacks in schools, see the inclusion of the African-American perspective as essential to improving school performance. Others say that the "triumphant history" of Western ideas and institutions is "Eurocentric" and should be taught as such.

The changing role of schools also comes under examination in this debate. Taking a historic view, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., prominent historian, Sobol committee member/dissenter, and author of *The Disuniting of America*, writes, "No institution has been more potent in the forging of a new American culture than the American public schools." Critics who worry that today's schools are failing in every respect, argue that literacy, not self-esteem, needs to guide educational curriculum. In an editorial in *Commonweal*, John Garvey argues that "attempts at curriculum reform aimed at instilling pride in children from minority groups, will instill, instead,

bad history."

How can the acceptance of a more diversified curriculum improve rather than undermine the essential role of schools? Does the elevating of group and ethnic rights further fragment American society, or is this simply the muscle of democracy finally flexing as ethnic and racial minority groups and women seek full recognition of their Constitutional rights?

Schlesinger welcomes the multicultural perspective, saying "Education is always ferment, and a good thing too," but he warns that "separatist pressures unchecked will lead to the tribalization of American life." What the questions over multiculturalism force into focus are competing interpretations of history that affect how we look at ourselves and define what it is to be an American.

For third-generation Japanese-American author-illustrator Sheila Hamanaka, history "is seen unfold-



Illustration from Vera B. Williams' book *Something Special For Me*

ing in a theater because so often what we take to be the truth of the past and the honesty of law is made up, a performance." A slide appears on the screen in the darkened conference room. It depicts, says Hamanaka, prominent US politicians and military personnel in 1941-1942 as Japanese Bunraku puppets, and behind them lurk the Kuromaku, which means "puppet masters" but also "political manipulators." These slides, along with photos from the National Archives, introduce Hamanaka's book *The Journey: Japanese Americans, Racism and Renewal*. With words and paintings, this history/art book details the painful experience of 120,000 Japanese Americans forced out of their homes to "relocation centers" after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Hamanaka recollected the uneasy silence about this issue when she was growing up; it was not exactly detailed in the history books and her own family did not openly speak of it. When she discovered that her grandfather had died in a "concentration camp, not in Europe but in America," she felt compelled through her art work to tell this story in the form of a five-panel mural, eight feet by twenty-five feet. "I painted a young boy holding a peach in this first panel," Sheila points to

the slide. This image, she explains, comes from a Japanese folklore story about Momotaro, the Peach Boy; "A childless couple find a peach. They open the fruit and out jumps a little boy who chases away demons." A photo flashes on the screen; it shows a corner store with a sign in the window: "The only good Jap is a dead one." Hamanaka emphasizes how people can be desensitized by racism; how many Japanese families broke down under the stress of being confined, and the shame of being released "with twenty-five dollars in their pocket" only to return to find their homes burned, their rich land taken.

"This remains a contemporary issue," states Hamanaka, referring to the public hearings of the Commission of Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians that brought about a formal apology to Japanese Americans from the US government in 1988. As the closing slide of the last panel of the mural comes into

view, the boy with the peach can be seen standing in front. Hamanaka pauses, "I painted *The Journey* to open the past, hoping to help chase away the demons of prejudice and injustice."

If competing ideas and concerns characterize multicultural programming, consensus can be more readily found on the curriculum issue of reading. All of the authors at the conference admitted to being avid readers as children; in his writings Walter Dean Myers described books as his "secret friends," and Vera Williams felt she "entered into the community of the library" with her card to borrow books. Nicholasa Mohr said, "Kids are hungry to know, to share...."

Yet identifying with characters and situations through reading was a limited experience for these authors who often found themselves reading about who they were not, or who they were supposed to become, following someone else's improved standards. Recalling how she saw "West Side Story" in her youth, Nicholasa Mohr asked, "What is it for a Puerto Rican girl to have a choice between Maria, the virgin, and Anita the loose one? When I was growing up," she adds, "there was no *Felita* around," referring to her own book about a young girl

who encounters racism for the first time when her Puerto Rican family moves "to a better neighborhood with better schools."

Mohr explained that during the 1940s and '50s in Spanish Harlem, where she lived, "most Latinos rejected their roots and embraced Anglo America with this struggle to fit in reinforced by the schools." It was not until the 1960s and after "much self-examination," that she began to write about the community she personally experienced, "to put my ethnic group in American letters." Mohr's *Nilda, El Bronx Remembered*, and *In Nueva York* are books she hopes will provide the "role models I didn't have to validate and celebrate my heritage and my future." "But," warned Mohr, "some have the idea of a model multicultural book. Multicultural literature is not exotic; there is not one Hispanic experience, not one black experience...do all whites have a family of four and a white picket fence? Get them all the books available to validate their experience."

Standing tall next to the podium, without a note for reference, Jamaka Highwater began his hour-long talk with a story about a young boy "in the great North Country" who sat by a lake almost every day to wait for the beautiful creature he knew as "Mexicata" to come down from the sky. Later, the child was removed from this ancient land and put under the care of "well-meaning people who thought the nicest thing they could do for the boy was make him like them." So when he described that "marvelous fly swim bird" that he had watched glide over the water, he was told it was not really called "Mexicata" but "duck." "Language," explained Highwater, "pre-determines what we are able to think; implications of ethnicity are in every word we use."

Highwater, who calls himself "an author who is Native American," not a "Native American author," was that young boy. Through experiences such as his relationship with a special teacher "who said yes instead of no," and his understanding of Joseph Campbell's book, *Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Highwater came to realize that "I didn't want to fit into someone else's mythology; I wanted to discover my own." "Personhood is a cherished gift," he said, and fundamental to celebrating diversity because "we are as culturally distinct as the clouds in the sky; what makes us different makes us alive." When this struggle for identity is not affirmed or allowed in a society, "when you destroy a person's experiences," Highwater said, quoting R.D. Laing, "they become destructive," and then "you sit back and are amazed LA is in flames."

Author of several fiction and non-fiction books on Native American culture, of which Newberry Honor Book *Anpao: An American Indian Odyssey* (described as "a Native American Alice in Wonderland") is perhaps his best

see *Multicultural*, page 11

A Conversation with Vera B. Williams

The Color of Roses

Teresa Demo

Vera Williams strokes the bright watercolor cover of her book, *A Chair for My Mother*, which brought her the Caldecott Award in 1983. Her illustrations have been described as "spontaneous, joyous, and loving." "Color is not simply functional and secondary here," she explains, "but primary to the integrity of the story." She flips the pages, many of which are framed with the graphic borders that stand as a hallmark of her illustration style. "The reason for the borders? Well, I sketch and doodle a lot and when I am working with a whole page—I really enjoy the formality of the page—sometimes I just need the borders to contain myself."

Moving her finger along the squares of blue tile that surround the first page of *A Chair For My Mother*, she says, "You know, I do the layout. I'm as interested in the design of the book as I am in the writing and illustrating. It comes from my days at Black Mountain College when, along with painting, I loved printing and typesetting." She reads aloud the opening lines of the book:

My mother works in the Blue Tile Diner. After school sometimes I meet her there. Then her boss Josephine gives me a job too.... When I finish, Josephine says, "Good work, honey," and pays me. And every time, I put half of my money in the jar."

Besides the young narrator, Rosa, the other characters are a jar and a chair. The jar is a large round one, like mayonnaise jars on a stock shelf in a diner. Rosa tells of helping her mother and grandmother save until they "can't get a single other coin in the jar." Then, they can purchase a chair to replace the furniture destroyed by a fire in their apartment building. This chair, in-

tended for Rosa's mother after her long days of work, also becomes a symbolic resting place for all to retire to in their weariness and enjoy love and contentment.

The book's back jacket is richly postcards to tell the story. The series of books including *A Chair for My Mother*, *Something Special for Me*, and *Music, Music for Everyone*, are known as "the Rosa trilogy"; each relates the experiences of young Rosa, her mother, and grandmother in their working-class neighborhood. "*More, More, More*" *Said the Baby*, a book that pictures the eagerness of toddlers to run, jump and cuddle,

clue to this book is changing that word 'illustration'; I did the paintings that accompany Grace's writing but much of this artwork was done separately." The book, she explains, was conceived from "the borders and vignettes of a calendar I was asked to do for the War Resisters' League, of which I am a member."

"Grace and I are from the same neighborhood," Williams says. "We walked together, as many did, to show our opposition to the Gulf War. In fact," she adds, "the first title for the book was *365 Reasons Not to Have Another War*."

I want to know why *The New*

to other buildings with lots of windows, a city of windows that represent to me the multiplicity of life." On the cover a woman with outstretched arms is opening the window, letting the day come inside. "Oh, I can remember," Williams recalls, "when getting a Saturday off was a gift!" But, she laughs, "Women still worked...."

Work has always been a main part of Williams' life, initially diverting her from her artwork, but ultimately enhancing it. She worked to make a living. Yet, she remarks that "my avocations have always been the same as my vocations - art, parenting, teaching, food, nature, and justice." She speaks of realizing a sense of activism, responsibility, and community involvement through work. These attitudes, developed by the early teachings of her "politically left-wing" immigrant parents, were reinforced by her experience of combining study with practical community work at Black Mountain College.

Motivated by a strong desire to become part of a community, Williams co-founded the Gate Hill Co-operative in the early 1950s along with her former husband and some friends. It was an "intentional, alternative community," where she shared in communal activities and also worked as a teacher. Over the years she continued graphic art, "often working on pamphlets and leaflets," ran a bakery, and was a cook in schools and restaurants."

The inspiration for what was later to become *A Chair For My Mother* may be found, Williams says, in a painting that she began one night when she got home from her waitressing job. She was exhausted, and "it was too late to call anyone to complain," so she sat down and painted herself a tired waitress in a chair with her head bent back. She handed the figure a coffee cup, and extended a border of empty cups along the bottom of the

painting.

I tell her my fondness for the story about painting she described in her Boston-Globe Horn Book Award acceptance speech; how she stayed up all night painting roses on a book jacket to get them "bigger and bigger, redder and redder." "You said afterwards," I recall for her, "that you realized that you were creating a testament to your feelings for the people and the values of your childhood." She nods. "You know, people ask me if this happened in my childhood, if we had such a chair. What we had was the absence of a chair."

"The Rosa books come out of a longing for home. For the 1930s," she explains, "my family was not atypical—we moved around for work, my mother worked, and at one point I was sent to a foster home to be cared for until we could reunite."

"But with the harsh realities and great pains of my childhood came a great joy." She recalls how her parents encouraged creativity and looked for educational opportunities for her, like the special free art classes she took for years. "They had a passion for education, not simply to get a job, but in the broader sense of knowing and enjoying the traditions of the world and nature." Happily she remembers the simple pleasures; picnics, family walks to Orchard Beach, going to the library.

Together we reminisce—perhaps through rose-colored glasses—about a kind of opportunity that seemed to abound in that depressed economic time, but is less evident these days. Williams talks about the special projects for children often run by "upper-class women" at the Bronx Settlement House, and programs sponsored by the Works Progress Administration that were in part based on the notion that building a better world came by way of bettering each child.

"So I painted a beautiful, regal
see Roses, page 19

The Five Day Week

The five-day week was set like a firecracker
The five-day week ah like a long bath in the
first bathtub of God
The five-day week was sunny all year (I
remember)
The five-day week gave at last what she'd always
longed for

a cheerful noisy companion
to Sabbath calm Queen of days

— Grace Paley

added another Caldecott Award to William's list of honors.

Her most recent work, *Long Walks and Intimate Talks*, a collaborative effort with poet and fiction writer Grace Paley, is not shelved in the children's section, but among the adult books. Having written poetry and adult short stories before concentrating on picture books, Williams comments, "To me these categories have never been separate."

"You did the illustrations..." I begin, but Williams interrupts. "The

York Times Book Review described the book as "a call for political action based on deep joy and a willingness to share in the suffering of others." Williams smiles. "Well, it has a lot to do with Grace's statement: 'to celebrate the day, which is its own reason for peace.'" Searching for a way to further clarify this idea, she explains, "It's like the piece on the 'Five Day Week.' [See box.]

"There is a window here," Williams says, holding the book up so I can see the cover. "I look out of my apartment window in New York City

Williams considered a similar question. Reading from a guide developed by the Council of Interracial Books for Children, which describes ways to analyze children's books for racism and sexism, she cited the query "What qualifies an author or illustrator to deal with a minority theme?" "After all," she said "I am whitish, culturally Jewish, and a woman—how can I create characters unlike myself that have meaning?"

Reviews of William's work have praised her honest portrayal of working-class culture, her inclusion of the single-parent family, and her ethnically diverse characters. Holding up her illustration of Bidemmi, a closeup of the brownish-blackish face of the protagonist from the book *Cherries and Cherry Pits*, Williams explained that characters arise from many "roots and combinations." "Bidemmi," she stressed, "was alive in the moment—not necessarily from some intention to show an Af-

rican American—that was not the motivation for this book." In fact, she added, "the bits of color that cover the book jacket are probably more intentionally political; the cherries or roses are more directly representational of the fullness and hopefulness of life. Bidemmi, on the other hand, is a true character, an amalgam from the experiences and perceptions of little Vera."

Walter Dean Myers, who has also met many of his characters, explained that as an author he strives to "include people I know in my book in a way that gives them value." Three-time winner of the Coretta Scott King Author Award and 1989 Newberry Honor Award recipient for *Scorpions*, a book about a gang in Harlem, Myers' writing has been described as "accurate and hopeful." In his novels for children and teenagers he tries to "bring the message that, despite the odds they face, young people can survive and suc-

ceed through inner strength and the support of family, friends, and the community."

Myers credits his mother with giving him the gift of reading, saying he "took what he could from books." He understood from reading that "intelligence was valued, so were higher ideals and people with noble purpose." "But," he said, "none were black. I couldn't find value for myself in books—stories about Nigger Jim or a boatload of slaves didn't work."

Discovering that he could write was affirming for Myers and became a way for him to "hook into" something that was valued by society. "African American children want to be included, not singled out or made to feel special," he explained. "I wrote *Now is Your Time: The African American Struggle for Freedom*, a book that documents three centuries of African-American experience and includes histori-

cal documents and photographs, "to tell this real history and to give children value in the world of my books."

"Remember," urged Myers, "you can change children—give them avenues of value. It will happen if writers, librarians, teachers, and parents do their job. For my part, I will keep writing...."

Sheila Hamanaka holds out a peach. Vera B. Williams paints roses. And Jamaka Highwater finishes Alice's story:

Alice looked at the Unicorn and said, "Well I'll make you a promise, since you do exist and I do exist, I will try hard to believe in you if you try hard to believe in me."

Teresa Demo studies Children's Literature at Syracuse University.

Multicultural

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known, Highwater has said that he attempts "to transliterate into languages other than my own the essences of my cultural precepts, which are fundamentally different from the conceptualizations of the dominant society." Highwater acknowledged that such affirmation carries the risk of offending others, but added, "multiculturalism is not comfortable."

An audience member asked Highwater whether the book *Black Elk Speaks*, written by John Neihardt, could be included in "multicultural literature." "There is room for this," he responded, acknowledging that it was not written by a Native American. "It is exclusive, indeed racist, to think only a black can write about blacks," Highwater said, "there is no universal agreement in groups; we are not knowledgeable by virtue of race but by conviction."

Author-illustrator Vera B. Wil-

Lit Crit

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ticism: we worship the Demiurge as God, more often than not under the name of Manifest Necessity." Elsewhere, drawing as close as he ever does to the essence of this American Gnosticism, Bloom defines it as "a knowing, by and of an uncreated self, or self-within-the-self, and the knowledge leads to freedom, a dangerous and doom-eager freedom: from nature, time, history, community, other selves." These are murky definitions at best, though they would seem to affirm a common core of spiritual self-reliance for both ancient and modern Gnostic practices. As one of the ancient Gnostic Gospels proclaims: "Jesus said, 'If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you'" [quoted from Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979, Vintage Edition pp. xiii-xiv)]. Whatever our Gnosticism may be, it "masks itself as Protestant Christianity yet has ceased to be Christian."

Gnosticism is but one leg of the tripod that supports the American religion, and what can't be attributed to it is laid at the door of Enthusiasm, the shudder of inspiration that takes hold of the worshipper at moments of highest religious intensity. Here Bloom would seem to be on solid ground, since this feature of the American religion, its high pitch of revivalist enthusiasm, is self-evident. It is this inner spark, the tremor of God within, that marks the revivalist ecstasy of the American religion in all its forms, especially the Baptist and the Pentecostal. From Cane Ridge to modern televangelism the feeling of divinity within driving the worshipper to orgies of devotion has been a mainstay of our native brands of Christian "post-Christianity." A third leg is Orphism ("an esoteric mystery cult whose central teaching was the potential divinity of the elitist self"), over which Bloom does not make a great fuss, though it too constitutes what is unique about the American religion.

The difficulty of these terms and Bloom's off-handed blurring of their differences makes *The American Religion* occasionally rough sledding. Not everyone is going to read it with a guide to religious terms at his elbow. (In Bloom's own practice, the generic human is now "she" and "her." That is, alas, no solution to the problems posed by the generic "he," only a trendy device to broadcast his gender awareness. In default of some more elegant solution, I'll stick with the standard generic for the moment. It is as least easier to say.) We can dispense with conceptual precision, however, since when Bloom gets down to cases he writes a flavorsome prose that more than compensates for his vaporizings as a theorist. Bloom, a Yale University English professor who has turned of late to Kabbalistic lore and Biblical interpretation, regards himself as an Enthusiast, expressing admiration for "the marvelous Jimmy Swaggart (of whose televangelism I remain a sincere and ardent fan)...." Not, we are reminded, Swaggart the ideologue, but Swaggart the media star, "the archetype of a Pentecostal preacher

old-style, apparently possessed, and famously convinced of his direct relationship to the Holy Spirit." Bloom, no stranger to the theatrical side of intellectual life, is justly admiring of an accomplished fellow performer who appears to be in thrall to the Word.

However, the book's real heroes are the Baptist theologian and sage E.Y. (Edgar Young) Mullins and Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon faith, who wrote (claiming to have transcribed) *The Book of Mormon* at the age of 24. It was Mullins, Baptism's major theologian, who defined the "competency" of the individual soul in matters of worship as the first principle of Baptist faith. In the *Axioms of Religion* (1908), he wrote: "Observe then that the competency of the soul in religion excludes at once all human interference, such as episcopacy, and infant baptism, and every form of religion by proxy. Religion is a personal matter between the soul and God." Baptist worship, as described by Mullins, was a democratic and individual faith, in which the communicant walked with the Jesus of his dreams, unaided by priest or doctrine. How consistent that was with Ralph Waldo Emerson's echt-American vision of individual divinity, and Bloom hails Mullins not only for his rational articulation of a creedless faith but for the spirit of democracy and spiritual self-reliance that he infused into Baptism's raptures. One of Bloom's great laments is that this principle of "soul competency" is now on the defensive, having been defeated in 1979 in a bitter struggle in the Southern Baptist Convention itself by a darker and more authoritarian tendency that has put the clergy back in power and compromised that "personal matter between the soul and God." For that reason the Baptist Convention has been called by some the "Catholic Church of the South," ironic in that Baptism has traditionally been so fiercely opposed to Catholicism. In that putsch, moreover, we can read the political decline of a nation.

"There is a dreadful overdetermination in the pattern of the events that have ruined the Southern Baptist Convention between 1979 and 1991, and which have made it a perfect microcosm of the fall of America during these Reagan-Bush years."

If Mullins was the evangelist of "soul competency," Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon religion, was "an authentic religious genius." "I myself," confesses Bloom, "can think of not another American, except for Emerson and Whitman, who so moves and alters my own imagination," and a fair chunk of *The American Religion* is devoted to praise of Smith's prophetic genius. Smith is credited with having been a great reader of the Bible, whose intuitive "strong misreadings" (a favorite concept of Bloom's) of the Old Testament were the makings of "a powerful new myth that recreated the ethos of primitive, pre-Torah Judaism itself." Though he was no great orator and a writer of indifferent ability, Smith was an authentic visionary whose visions had nation-forming power. "The entire burden of Joseph Smith's prophecy was that the Kingdom of God was destined to

be set up in America, and that only a Chosen People could rely upon themselves enough to be able to organize the Kingdom." America already was a chosen nation, since the Indians were descended from the lost tribes of Israel and had already experienced a thousand years of Hebraic culture from 600 BC through 400 AD. But they were also "Christians after Christ, because the resurrected Jesus manifested himself to them in America..." A fantastic vision without a doubt, but certainly one suited to a new world that was in need of spiritual justification on its own terms and eager to cast off the baggage of Europe, not to say the remote authority of the Holy Land. Joseph Smith's murder by the Illinois militia in 1844 at the age of 38 and the violence brought down upon his followers were testimony to his charismatic power. Denouncers of America as Sodom were unpopular

vah." As if we need reminding, even in reading prophecy, the English professor always keeps his marking pencil within reach.

Moreover, Bloom's reverence for Joseph Smith is not extended to contemporary Mormonism, which Smith, and his successors Brigham Young and Joseph Taylor would hardly recognize, and which has lost the prophetic vision and become "socially, politically, and economically [a] reactionary bastion of the American establishment." Indeed, in his strictures on the fatal turn away from original visions taken by the Baptist and Mormon Churches, Bloom emulates the prophet Jeremiah and indulges some gloomy fin-de-siècle prognostications of his own. Both churches are power institutions that, through the willing collaboration of the Republican Party, have saturated our political climate with millennial portents.



illustration: Irving Mink

with the Sodomites themselves.

Bloom's dissertation on Joseph Smith and *The Book of Mormon* is the centerpiece of *The American Religion*, and Bloom conducts it with the boldness and brio of, if not an acolyte, at least a fan. Ever since his early books on Romantic poetry, *The Visionary Company* in 1961 and *Blake's Apocalypse* in 1963, Bloom has been lining up on the side of visionary boldness. Where the vision is tepid or prose style insufferable, indeed, he gets snappish. He is dismissive of Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, whose prose "is one of the great ordeals of the American Religion." Ellen Harmon White, founder of Seventh-day Adventism, fares no better: "As with Mrs. Eddy, there is evidence of multiple authorship and of generous plagiarism, yet these do not much alleviate Ellen White's murky drabness." The writings of Charles Taze Russell and Joseph F. Rutherford, founders of the Jehovah's Witnesses "offend anyone's sense of human dignity, provided such a sense exists. They propose a theocratic Fascism that is not mitigated by assigning the dictatorship to a tyrant they call Jeho-

There is scarcely an issue before the public in which sanctimony does not take precedence over pragmatism. Vice-President Dan Quayle's recent (1992) speech before the Southern Baptist Convention complaining of the elites who cheer the dissolution of the family is only the most recent case in point. In a peroration that saw separate publication in the *New York Times*, Bloom turns his guns on President Bush who "waves the flag and the fetus, and we are returned to some of the darker consequences of the Gnostic stance of the religion of our climate." And who will accuse him of being excessively gloomy?

Finally, *The American Religion* is, as Bloom himself might say, a "strong misreading" of religion in America. Though captivating in some of its particulars, its take on the American religion is too idiosyncratic, too wedded to Bloom's personal agendas, to be relied upon. One of Bloom's claims is that the communicant in the American religion is a radically isolated figure, alone with God in the most acute moments of worship. Lacking a sense of the communal, we are told, the American religion is a species of

"orgiastic individualism." The inconvenient habit of worshippers to form congregations (a word that is never uttered in this book) and for orgiastic individuals to assemble in multitudes is dismissed in rhetorical feints like this one: "Freedom is solitude for the American Religionist, alone with the spirit, but alone in a way that points to our Shamanistic tendency to merge into another." Say what? Thus Cane Ridge was "no more communal than the rapture at Woodstock; each barking Kentuckian or prancing yippie barked and pranced for himself or herself alone."

This is wrong in a fundamental and revealing way. Fundamental because it leaves Bloom with no means of explaining how this orgiastic individualism gets translated into the political power that the Southern Baptist Convention and Mormon Churches wield. Leadership, organizational prowess, and lavish contributions alone won't explain the sources of that power and conviction. Only the deep communities that are formed through common worship can begin to make explanatory sense. You have to "walk that lonesome valley" by yourself, but when thousands are walking the same lonesome valley at the same time, they do find ways to pool their lonesomeness. And that error is revealing because it tips Bloom's hand; it tells us where, as they say, he is coming from.

Bloom is coming from the country of imaginative literature, and it is never to be forgotten that for all his fascination with the more passionate and mystical forms of religion, he is first of all a literary critic, a "lit critter," whose sensibilities were trained in that school of alienation and self-absorption known as literary studies, indeed in that seminar of solitude called American literature. How else does Ralph Waldo Emerson earn twenty-three citations in the index of a book on religion, or Melville and Hawthorne get mentioned at all? Bloom scants the communal, because, as a life-long lit critter, he has no vocabulary for it, no ready store of concepts for understanding how dreams and delusions diffuse into culture or how personal myths get mobilized as public policies. This isn't Bloom's shortcoming alone: it is commonplace among his fellow lit critters who find themselves in the realm of the social. Trained to see the individual soul as the inevitable bottom line, they are at a loss before the collective and the communal. They don't know quite what to do with it.

The concept of post-Christianity is another lit crit hangover, imported from a world in which nothing has intellectual standing unless it is post-something-else: post-modern, post-humanist, post-structuralist, post-Freudian, post-Marxist, post-colonial. We inhabit a perpetual end of days in literary studies, and nothing among us carries as much weight as the announcement that all the conceptual categories have been superseded. In Bloom's particular case, this habit of supersession is further complicated by his uncertainty about whether he really means it and what, precisely, the new American religion is post.

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Antlered Poetry

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splendors; it's at once a way of juxtaposing and tearing apart. Sometimes it is little more than a union of discordant elements that produces the loveliest sound. The image allows the poet to connect with tidings in himself he wouldn't otherwise be privy to; it lets him bring new objects of desire into being, so that they may be contemplated and possessed. William Matthews, in his poem, "Praise," says his lover's hips are "calcium outriggers covered by flesh"; that her fingers are "failed tunnels into nothingness." I don't think the image — or love, for that matter — can get any more powerful than that.

D.M. In your poem, "I Say," poetry becomes a creature, a "cankerous beast," a strange female buck afoot in "the rutting season." What is the significance of this creature for you? Could it be seen as a metaphor for all your poetry? For poetry in general?
T.M. I remember having to fend off a lot of criticism for that creature, from fellow poets who insisted a buck was a male deer. But when I wrote "A buck herself, poetry uprises/ In the ripple of autumn," it wasn't exactly deer I had in mind. I think certain people had problems with the metaphor because it went against type — it was so deliberately unthinkable, so contrary to reason. But that's precisely why I couldn't let it go; I'd seen poetry, after all, emerge from the dark woods, and she had the largest antlers I'd ever laid eyes on. I don't know that my antlered poetry has any significance, or any significant implications — that's for others to decide. I'm just happy I had the courage to stick by it, and to follow my own inclinations. And I guess that's the best

advice I can give anyone who's tracking a poem: do what you have to do to get yourself where you're going.

D.M. You have said in another context that poetry for you is "a kind of possession — the bringing of a new thing into the world" whereby perception is "concentrated and transformed: all that the poets knows he knows through the medium of language; each word has heft, and must be hefted. . . . One walks in the woods of language to make pacts with the unexpected." What did you mean by that?

T.M. What I was probably thinking about there was the *chancy-ness* of poetry: you hope for it; you look for it; you wait for it. But I don't think you ever consciously make it, as you would make, say, a table or a chair. The raw materials are different. Words don't often lay themselves out before you like so many tools. For me language is an unsettling thick tree that I'm always hacking at with my metaphysical axe — often to no avail. Sometimes bits of bark will fly — words — and sometimes I can use them, "make" something of them if you will. But I think most of the good walks I've taken in poetry's woods became good walks when something befell me, when the thing I was least prepared for came out of the shadows and started to breathe. Thoreau was once congratulated on his "originality," and he took issue with the term. He said he owed everything to *curiosity*, to a propensity for seeking: "I am curiosity from top to toe." I've never bought into the idea that a poet is a creator, first and foremost, that he somehow has a *talent* for language, a charlatanic way with words. That's baloney. Poets are just more in-

quisitive — they aren't as afraid, to be afraid to risk themselves in language. That's why we say the greatest dancers, actors, writers, whatever — are "poetic." We mean that they have fundamentally curious dispositions, that they are willing to go beyond the ordinary, beyond the rational, beyond the sane.

D.M. How much of the "experience" in your poems is your experience? Are your poems, loosely speaking, biographical?

T.M. I've never been comfortable appropriating another's experience or stepping into another's shoes, and the one time I tried cost me several months of pain. I had a good friend in Montana, a fishing buddy, and one day he told me about a moose he'd happened upon, a cow — that's a female moose — who was perched on a narrow outcropping on the side of a steep, rocky slope. She'd lost her footing, evidently, on the trail above, and had fallen — the small ledge breaking her fall, and two of her legs. My friend told me he could see her ribcage, and her sad eyes, and it looked to him as though she'd been stranded there for several days. And this was the middle of winter. When my friend returned to his home, he called the forest ranger and told him about this *absolutely helpless* moose. The ranger showed up at my friend's house the next morning, and my friend led him to the spot. The ranger shot the poor animal almost as soon as he saw it. Quick and merciful, he said. Nothing else he could do. Now, I'd seen a few moose of my own, but never this moose, and as I listened to my friend tell me about her and about what he'd seen I decided I'd try to make the experience my own. It turned into probably the worst poem

I've ever written. It was clever in places, and shrewdly lined, but it didn't ever feel right: the tone was phony, the memory, false. So, yes, I guess I have lived through my poems, and live in them — at least the ones I'm happiest with. They're mine, in the sense that they came naturally to me, and didn't resist my advances.

D.M. Do you leave yourself outside your poems, or do you become several different selves within them?

T.M. That's a tricky question, so I'll give you a tricky answer. René Char says a poet is a "magician of insecurity," and I think that might mean that a poet is never secure enough in himself to know what other selves might emerge when he submerges himself in poetry's unpredictable waters. Is that tricky enough? Seriously, though, a sizeable part of myself goes into every poem I write, and I am often amazed at the selves I become when I am writing most consciously out of the self I think I know.

D.M. Is there a place for humans in your poems?

T.M. Humans — as we're calling them — do have a place in my poetry, but it isn't an exalted place, necessarily, or a place of privilege. I don't see humankind — as a species, I mean — any more sacred or deserving of contemplation than anything else one finds in the world. Humanity seems to me a *corrupted* form of the natural, so I'm only trying to restore it to its proper place on the wheel. Wordsworth was taken by the solitary, the recluse — the discharged soldier comes to mind — but he didn't go looking for these characters. He stumbled upon them, and they more often than not interrupted one of his reveries — and

only then did they become a part of his consciousness, his poetry. Wordsworth learned about himself by working out of a poetry of encounter, and I suppose I'm the same way. I write about what comes my way — humans included.

D.M. You've written several long poems. What are the benefits (or drawbacks) of this form for you? Can we expect a long poem from you sometime in the future?

T.M. There's a certain freedom in the long poem that you don't find in the short one, and I think this is why so many poets don't practice it, and why so many scholars discredit it as a genre. Liberty isn't the easiest thing to contend with, and a poem without limits is to some a daunting prospect. The long poem is an accessible form for me in part because I tend to drag things out anyway. We can come full circle to that mountain question: Going up to a mountain involves questing and seeking, and the top of the mountain, if the mountain's big enough, is the furthest thing from your mind. So as you wind your way upwards, taking things in, your sort of unmountain the mountain, if you know what I mean: what began as an expedition with certain ends becomes a certain endlessness that requires no expedition. So the long poem gives me a chance to set a goal for myself and then lose myself in the search for it. It's a quest, and the lovely thing is you never quite know what you are seeking. I'm sweating over a long poem now, I'm enjoying myself, and I don't see an end to it. I'll let you know how it goes.

Delaram Moussavi is a senior in the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell University.

Lit Crit

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Announcing the post-Christian era in the title of his book and proclaiming it throughout his first chapter, he concedes at the start of his next chapter that "Religion, in the ostensibly Protestant United country is misleading. Rather, we are post-Protestant." Bloom is in the land of deep fudging here, from which no amount of fancy footwork

will release him. We had always thought that Christianity, in any of its forms, was a belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ and the salvation of man's immortal soul through his crucifixion. Bloom nowhere suggests that any of the denominations under scrutiny has abandoned that article of faith, and thus it is hard to know precisely what is "post-Christian" about them. True, none of E.Y.

Mullins' six "Axioms of Religion" cites eternal salvation, but as Bloom himself says, "The definitive answer of Mullins to the question: 'What do Baptists believe?' would be simply that 'Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life.'" What, we are bound to ask, is so post-Christian about that? Post-Protestantism is easier to herald, since there is no one around, let alone Bloom, to tell us

what Protestantism is anyway.

All that is solid here melts into air, and what remains is best read as a suggestive essay on what religion in America might look like through the eyes of an agnostic, secular Jew, a post-Jewish Jew, let's say, who has a passion for the transports of a world that he himself has never experienced. *The American Religion* is a bit of an intellectual tour, and

one should regard it as the diary of a traveller in exotic climes called Cane Ridge Kentucky, Salt Lake City Utah, Nauvoo Illinois, and the burned-over district of upstate New York. As such, it is also a tour through the mind of Harold Bloom, who, under the guise of scholarship, has imagined a burned-over district of his own and declared it to be post-Christian America.

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Hollywood

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ing America — its myths and heroes. I never had an adolescence where I could say no to the values of the official culture. Probably that's what's still wrong with me; I haven't had an adolescence. It was an odd way to live, but good material for a writer. Actually, I've tried for over two decades to write the story of that syndrome, but I can't seem to get it right. I guess it comes out other ways, in my novels and articles.

J.D. Was there ever a time when you said no to the values of the culture?

D.M. This too is odd, I mean I wonder about kids today. I often ask my students, "Who's the greatest living American?" and there's a long silence, and they don't got nobody. When I graduated from Stanford, John Kennedy had been elected President and he was such a gorgeously attractive person (this was before we knew his sleazier side) he was a movie-star president. Since the '60s kids haven't had that; whereas I, if I had been asked at their age who my hero was, I could have said JFK, Bobby, Martin, Malcolm. It was a different world and so my relation to it was much more benign, so I continued — Phi Beta Kappa at Stanford, went to Columbia and got my PhD because one wanted to be brilliant and educated like John Kennedy and part of the majority culture.

J.D. But those people you just named were all assassinated. What about that?

D.M. By that time I was a grownup. I think it's different. The guys I had as presidents in my lifetime were all good guys — FDR, Harry Truman, Eisenhower was fine, John Kennedy. But these kids — what have they had? Bad presidents, impeached presidents, defeated presidents. It's a whole different relationship between the self and American culture. I was only five years old when World War II ended, but the lesson I carried with me was that "we" were the good guys, America saved the planet from Hitler. For these kids, that war they carry with them is Vietnam. That's a hell of a difference, it changes everything. When my disillusionment came there was another different kind of America that one could relate to in a healthy way — I taught in black schools in the South, in the summers of the '60s I taught draft resisters in prisons.

J.D. When did you decide to write fiction?

D.M. I always wanted to. When I was little, I loved to stay home from school and write stories — even when I was 8 and 9 years old. That's another difference between kids now and the world I lived in. Probably the most precious memory of my childhood was listening to my parents read to me at bedtime. I'd lie there in the semi-darkness, getting tired, and imagining things, making mental pictures out of the words. I just loved it when my father read me *Huckleberry Finn*. For me, early on, making up a story seemed like a wonderful, beautiful thing to do. Many kids today seem to find their relationship to language through *Sesame Street*. My own son learned his alphabet in front of the TV. I suppose that's good in many ways, but it's different.

J.D. Is there any part of the writing process that's difficult for you?

D.M. Somebody said, "I don't love to write, but I love to have written." The hardest thing for me is getting up every morning and facing the blank piece of paper. I love to revise. The most difficult part for me is the first draft. I always do it on a little portable typewriter I've had rebuilt four times. I won it in a speech contest in Fresno when I was sixteen. I've just gotten so friendly with it that I can't imagine writing any other way. That's why I don't use word processors or those other tools of the devil. I'm very superstitious about it. I have all sorts of secret, funny little rituals, and apprehensions, and lucky charms. What I love most is when the story starts to go on its own and gets away from what I had anticipated it would do, and then it's like I'm listening to the story and wondering how it will come out. That seems to me a key thing in a book, when something happens that you hadn't anticipated and then you're really excited about it.

J.D. In the past 20 years you've gone from the note-card approach to novel writing to taping oral history, using people's real professional experiences to fictionalize. How different is this process and do you think you'll stick with it?

D.M. A colleague of mine at Cornell characterized my recent string of books as "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief." Actually, that's kind of accurate, because I've written two novels in collaboration, and now I'm writing a third. The first was with a policeman, the second with a doctor on an Indian reservation, and now I'm writing the third with a judge. I think this will be the last one; I don't think I'll work that way any more because it can get to be a gimmick, a shtick. But it's not that different from the note cards because I have to transcribe the stuff and then make it up and switch it around so the real people won't get mad at me. This is something I've enjoyed doing because one of the pleasant things about being a novelist is its helpless, submissive dependence on the exterior world. I like to write about professions I'm unfamiliar with, because then I learn all about a world I didn't know. I'm not a minimalist or a postmodernist; I find much more congenial an older notion of the novel. Finding a world and building it up block by block, living in it; that's a tonic experience.

J.D. What was the inspiration for *Jack the Bear*?

D.M. Well it was funny. I'd been a Fulbright Fellow in the south of France the summer before I wrote *Jack the Bear*, and I wrote two or three little stories, sketches really, from the point of view of a child. I didn't know why I was doing that, I don't write short stories very much. The next year I had a Guggenheim at Berkeley where I was supposed to be writing a critical biography of James Agee. But then this little kid, Jack the Bear, wandered into my imagination, and he sat down and took over. It was one of the pleasantest writing experiences I've ever had, because every morning at nine I could begin and it was like turning on a faucet in the kitchen — it just flowed naturally. As soon as I could hear his voice the whole

thing became clear. That's also true of *Tripphammer*, the policeman. I needed the anecdotes from my research assistant — the policeman himself — but I think that for me all eight of my novels have been written from the first-person point of view. That means artificially acquiring a language and a voice that is not my own, but has immense imaginative appeal to me.

J.D. Is *Jack the Bear* a particularly California story? Do you think the California setting somehow sets the tone for that story?

D.M. Oh, absolutely. I wrote it when I was out there just across the Berkeley line in the Oakland hills. There were a lot of kids around, I didn't have to punch any kind of time clock. I'd go out in the afternoon and play touch football with the kids and then, next morning, I'd

work. The only movie voiceover I like is in *Sunset Boulevard*.

J.D. Before the movie was cast, what actor did you envision playing the part of the father?

D.M. For a long time I thought it was going to be Robin Williams. I talked to him on the set of "Mork and Mindy" and I actually took my son — he was eight years old at the time — and he was so excited when Robin came up and said "Nanu nanu" and shook his hand. I pictured Robin Williams that way for a long time and I know he was committed to the project. But Danny DeVito got hold of it, and he and his wife Rhea Perlman — Carla on "Cheers" — both just absolutely demanded that Danny do it, and he's done a good job. It's certainly not the way I ever pictured the father. It's a much angrier father, a heavier father,

ful movie and much better than *Jack the Bear*. Mainly because the director, Lasse Halstrom, who did *My Life as a Dog*, and the script writer, Steve Tesich, who won an Oscar for *Breaking Away*, both seem to me just the right temperament and spirit to catch Trip as he should be caught — that wry, self-deprecating humor. My worry was that they'd turn it into a police procedural. With these two guys in charge, they won't.

J.D. Why don't more authors write screenplays of their own work?

D.M. First of all, because it's really hard to do. I mean, I found that out.

J.D. It's that different?

D.M. It's that different. Eudora Welty told me that Tennessee Williams said to her, "You write beautiful dialogue. Why don't you write a play?" And when she tried she found out she didn't know how. It

On The Set

Hollywood is really quite strict about the education of its "child stars"; each day they have to spend a prescribed number of hours in school, little classes close by the set. The middle-aged woman tutoring the children in *Jack the Bear* was quite formidable. The executive producer told me that the woman found my novel "dirty" (too many four-letter words), and had prohibited her charges from reading it. So I was a little hesitant and apologetic when I was introduced to her; I said, almost under my breath, "I'm the guy who wrote the book." The woman looked at me oddly; an expression of pain came over her face, and she said something that still has me puzzled: "You mean," she softly whispered, "you wrote it *down*?" I'm afraid I replied too glibly, "No, I made it *up*!" But whatever did she mean? I "wrote it *down*?" Maybe she didn't quite have a handle on the concept of fiction; maybe she thought there was some *real story* out there, and I was a journalist who took notes on it as it developed. Who knows? Her words still haunt me.

— Dan McCall

write about what happened the day before. For me *Jack the Bear* is inseparable from that neighborhood, that weather, the whole feel of the Bay Area in 1972.

J.D. Back when you wrote it, Jack was 12 and you were 33. Now Jack is nearly 33. Do you think it will hit the screen in your lifetime?

D.M. I've been burned too many times.

J.D. What was most difficult in adapting it to the screen?

D.M. Exactly what I was just talking about — the voice. It's very hard to make a good movie out of a book that has a distinctive tone to the telling. We've seen three *Huckleberry Finn* movies, none of which is any good. We'll never get *Catcher in the Rye* because you can't find pictures for the words of Holden Caulfield. *Jack the Bear* depends on the voice of that 12-year-old being in our ears — how do you find a correlative way of turning sound into sight, of getting the slippery ironic edge that the language of the book gives you into pictures on the screen? It's a tough problem. They tried in the movie to solve it with voiceovers, having Jack speak to us from somewhere that's not the action we're seeing on the screen. In my opinion it doesn't work at all. Now they're reshooting the movie, and I think I've got them to realize that they should get rid of those burdensome, often irrelevant, often too-knowing voiceovers that just don't

there's not the light touch that I think Robin would have brought. It doesn't have any of the manic, or elevating energy. But it has a strength of its own, I think.

J.D. Who would you ideally have liked to see directing *Jack the Bear*?

D.M. I think Marshall Herskovitz is a good director. He got wonderful performances out of all the actors. We had some disagreements — a lot of them.

J.D. You spent ten days on the Hollywood set. What was most gratifying about the treatment of your novel and what was most disappointing?

D.M. Well, what I saw in ten days on the set was all gratifying — a very pleasant experience. The sets were fine; the actors were fine; the action sequences seemed strong. I think the problem with the movie is going to be the editing. I worry about the rhythms. The movie seems to me at this point to be slow and a little bewildering in its narrative development. You don't quite know where it's going or whether you're supposed to laugh or cry. I'm worried about that. It's also so much more sentimental than the book, because it doesn't have Jack's ironic voice. It's a little weepy, I think. Not as tough as the book.

J.D. How has your experience with *Jack the Bear* affected your feeling about *Tripphammer* as a movie?

D.M. I think it's entirely possible that *Tripphammer* will be a wonder-

wasn't good. In the total control of the short story she knows how to make you read the lines and the dialogue, she knows exactly how to do it. But to create words for a machine — a human being — to interpret, is somehow categorically different. Look back at the history of Hollywood in the last 50 years; even somebody like William Faulkner — he did turn out some good B movies, a few maybe even better.

J.D. Were they his own, from his own novels?

D.M. They weren't his own.

J.D. Do you know of any author who has written the screenplay for his or her own novel?

D.M. Oh sure. Friends of mine have done it. Lenny Michaels wrote *Men's Club*. But it's hard, and immensely frustrating, because you aren't in charge. When you're writing a novel or a short story, you're the boss. When you write for Hollywood, you're nothin'. They throw away your stuff and make up new things. Writers like Fitzgerald and Aldous Huxley found this out. James Agee found it out. I think it was Harry Cohn who called writers "schmucks with Underwoods" — that's what you are when you're in Hollywood. There's a wonderful joke that sounds a little offensive I guess, but its message is right: "Did you hear about the Polish starlet? She went to Hollywood and slept see *Hollywood*, page 16

McCall: Take 2

Peggy Haine

P.H. I take it then that Jack the Bear is semi-autobiographical.

D.M. Sure. Jacky's first experience with Beanpole Karen Morris was exactly what my first date was like when I was 12 years old. The Pink Fang, as it was called in the book, was the first house I lived in on Woodcrest Avenue when I came to Ithaca in 1966.

The whole story about the kidnapping of Dylan, Jacky's 3-year-old brother, was taken right out of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. A little boy in the neighborhood had been kidnapped. He was missing for about four or five days and then they found him in a rainstorm up by the reservoir. He was suffering from exposure, but he was okay. It did take him a little while to talk again. The ranger who found him gave him a little pair of cowboy boots. You know, the *Chronicle* would come every morning and I'd write a little more. I came back to Ithaca and lived in Edgar Rosenberg's house down the street, and two years later, I get a phone call from the *San Francisco Examiner* book editor. He loved the book and was about to review it. He said, "We had a case out here a couple of years ago that was just like the one in your book." I said, "No kidding! Isn't that funny?" And he said, "It's really

weird. The ranger even gave the kid cowboy boots." I said, "That really is amazing."

P.H. Did you work with the script writer?

D.M. I've got correspondence that thick [McCall indicates a hefty load of correspondence]. The script writers have Jacky reading to Dylan from a kids' book that their mom used to read to them called *Runaway Bunny*, which I gather is a children's classic. I've never heard of it. It was so saccharine — just awful. I told them to use *Where the Wild Things Are*. It's perfect for the time. It's right for the character. So the producer says, "Uh, we didn't use *Runaway Bunny*. I hope you'll like my selection. We ought to do *Where the Wild Things Are*."

They've also cut all the fucks out.

P.H. Oh. Every single last one?

D.M. No, there's one left. It may sound funny, since they're all my fucks. I put them there in the first place. *Jack the Bear* was banned in Idaho. I found out about this from a thesis I read. It started with the mother of an impressionable boy. The boy took the book home from the library. She circled every four-letter dirty word. By page 60 she'd found 87. The thesis reproduced the book with her mutilations, so it read like "fuck-shit-fuck-shit-fuck-shit-fuck-shit" and that's all you can

read. I find out about these things years later. Down at the local library it was in the children's section. The title *Jack the Bear* sounds like a children's book. If you're reading a book and it offends you, you can close it and do something else. But



photo: Kathy Morris

if you're in a theater with your family and you keep hearing "fuck" on the soundtrack, it's very unpleasant. I'm glad they've been taken out. The producers have been fighting me all the way on this. But now they've given in. It's a movie, and we want a PG-13 rating.

P.H. Ah — economics.

D.M. That's not allowed? But the thing I've really been objecting to, which is not in the book, is that after

Danny DeVito [the father] demolishes the car, he goes in the house with a crowbar and starts waving it at Norman's parents [Norman is the psychopath who lives across the street planning tortures for the neighborhood dogs and children] yelling, "You raised him, you're responsible. It's your fault." I told the producers that this guy attacks property, he doesn't attack old people. Talk about losing sympathy for the main character. To see him bullying two helpless elderly people — we can't do that.

There've been about five actors who had signed to do the lead role. While I was working on previous scripts, I tried to tailor Dad's voice to Burt Reynolds, Ken Howard, and Robin Williams. Then they told me they had signed Danny DeVito. I mean, the guy in the book, I think, looks like me. Danny DeVito doesn't look like me.

P.H. Did you have any exchange with DeVito?

D.M. When I arrived out there I hadn't met him face to face. I'd spoken to him on the phone. I told Bruce Gilbert I'd like to meet him. He told me to go knock on his trailer. I pass this beautiful black Rolls Royce and reach up and start to knock. A voice says, "Hey!" I look around and there's this 6-foot 8-inch, 300-pound guy who looks like a professional football player. He's

DeVito's bodyguard.

P.H. Danny DeVito needs a bodyguard?

D.M. I wouldn't think so. But I said, "I wrote the book." And then the door to the trailer opened and Danny came out. He asked me how I like the script now? And I said, "You know that scene where Jack's girlfriend Karen Morris sends him down in flames? At this point in the movie, we don't give a damn about Jacky's relationship with Karen Morris. The relationship that's really crucial to us is with you and Jack, father and son." Danny's sitting there, "Um-hmm." I kept going, "You can do that scene with all those lines, but do it between you and Jack, right there on the front porch of the Pink Fang. You're a father. You hear that your son's disappointed in love. It's a very touching and interestingly contoured emotional experience. Remember in *On the Waterfront* in the cab, the lines 'Charlie, Charlie, you should've taken care of me,' that's what's going on. It's going to be great." And DeVito said, "Like it, like it."

Later I meet Bruce Gilbert going to his trailer. I told him that Danny liked my idea. Bruce said, "Of course he did. It makes his part big ger."

City Limits

continued from page 1

good schools.

Well documented are the astronomical rates of unemployment, pervasive low wages, and widespread poverty that afflict communities of African Americans, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Central American immigrants, and other Third World people. The Census Bureau, the Internal Revenue Service, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics have recently released numbers that confirm the claims about growing inequalities made earlier by left-wing social scientists like Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, the authors of *The Great U-Turn*. Although income and wealth have always separated white Americans from citizens of color, the gap did start diminishing moderately in the 1960s and early 1970s. Since the late 1970s, however, it has increased with a vengeance, and big-city poverty areas are today even more widely separated from the mainstream.

Even the language has changed to accommodate the new, dead-end racial inequality. The objectionable term "underclass" came back into common use when social scientists caved in to the conservative reality by explaining poverty in terms of pathology, rather than arguing for better social policy. Ideologically, this has set whole neighborhoods apart from the mainstream by blaming the problems they confront on their own aberrant behavior. Because most scholars have been reluctant to concede that the social system is failing, they have had little alternative but to propose how victims of discrimination and poverty should change their behavior, if not their color; if it is not the system, it

must be the people.

Yet the numbers from the census are revealing. In 1975, when things still looked relatively good, the median income for African-American families was only about 60% of the median income for white families. Since then, the gap has grown into an unbridgable chasm in family wealth, which may matter even more than income. As measured by the census, a family's wealth is its accumulation of unspent previous income, plus inheritance, holdings of stocks, bonds, and cash (minus credit card debt), equity in real property, including houses, and the net value of appliances and automobiles. In 1988, half of the white married couples in the country had more than \$62,000 in net wealth; half had less. If we take this median value as the standard, then we find that white female-headed households were worth about one-third of that — only \$22,000, while African-American and Hispanic female-headed households were worth less than one-eighth of the standard, only \$750. That means the vast majority of nonwhite women have no wealth holdings at all — no stocks, bonds, or real estate, and not even cars or cash or credit cards. They have no money to meet daily needs, not to mention emergencies.

This income inequality has become nearly absolute, not only because the gap is so enormous — \$750 compared to \$62,000 — but because it is growing and there is no indication that anything is being done to reduce it. As Andrew Hacker says in his recent book, *Two Nations*, "The significance of racism lies in the way it consigns certain human beings to the margins of society, if not

painful lives and early deaths."

II. Inequalities of Place

The second cause of the deep social division that wracks the United States today is the peculiar pattern of metropolitan growth in the post-World War II period. This process of city growth not only built on the divisive foundations of slavery and racism, but moved us even further from our professed ideals of equality. Federal policies have consistently aided suburbs and hurt cities with subsidies and profits for highway builders and automobile manufacturers, tax giveaways and other benefits for house builders, bankers, and suppliers, and perquisites of all sorts for suburbanites. The Interstate Highway program built 41,000 miles of freeways, aiding suburbs with the largest public-works project the world has ever known. Federal Housing Administration loan guarantees and tax deductions for mortgage interest payments now amount to a federal aid program of more than \$80 billion a year, paid predominantly to suburbanites, and dwarfing any other federal urban policy. Eighty billion dollars is vastly more than the aggregate cost of all public housing built since World War II; it highlights the insignificance of the 1.3 billion dollars of one-time emergency urban aid that Congress and the White House debated in June as a response to the Los Angeles troubles.

These suburban-subsidy policies have aided 40 years of economic boom that accompanied America's dominance in world affairs. Big cities played a central role in this great economic and physical expansion, and the "growth coalitions"

that dominated expansionary urban and national politics in the 1960s and 1970s promised great things.

But the boom eventually left cities behind; highways did not just build suburbs, they also devastated city centers. Housing programs, restricted to segregated suburbs for white buyers, neglected the need to reinvest against urban decay, and even the Urban Renewal programs came justifiably to be known as Negro Removal. Insurance companies and banks further pushed city neighborhoods down as they unfairly and often illegally refused to issue fire insurance or grant mortgages. Altogether thousands more units of housing were destroyed than were built.

The *coup de grace* came with metropolitan Balkanization. In most countries (and previously in many parts of the United States) city hall jurisdiction would grow and extend geographically along with metropolitan growth, so the beneficiaries of growth would pay its costs. In the post-war boom exactly the opposite happened. Political and fiscal jurisdictions multiplied and separated, enabling families who left the city to

escape fiscal responsibility. Although suburbans used public utilities, streets, and bridges in the cities, they skipped town without paying into funds necessary to save against depreciation. They continued to use downtown facilities, such as libraries, universities, and concert halls, as well as central business districts (renovated with public funds), while avoiding taxation, except to support their restricted and privileged suburbs. As Richard Sennett argued in *The Uses of Disorder*, suburbanization even provided a psychological isolation that effectively dismissed the differences increasingly separating city and suburb, to say nothing of the extra costs to the city. It is these costs that burden cities today.

In the last 25 years, following the construction of the highways and the suburbs, the entire US economy has shifted toward services and information. Some cities have experienced vigorous downtown restructuring to provide congenial homes for new and expanded administrative activities. However, most inner cities, once pivotal centers of manufacturing and industry,

see *City Limits*, page 20

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Hollywood

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with the writer."

J.D. The mother in *Jack the Bear* can't be developed beyond the 12-year-old's memory of her that makes the memory idealized. There is a scene in which Jacky is mean to her after a minor embarrassing incident. Was that incident based on anything in your experience?

D.M. My mother once gave a surprise birthday party for me and I came into the house after my tap-dancing lesson, singing and dancing, into the breakfast room. All these guys that I played football and basketball with heard me singing, this little jerk with his tap shoes on. It took me a long time to come back down to the party and I was kind of mean to Mom. Since Jack's mother died when he was eleven, he often broods over times when he feels he didn't love her enough, or he wasn't good enough, or he caused her trouble and pain.

J.D. In *Jack the Bear*, the mother of the boy is dead. In *Triphammer* his wife, the mother of his young son, is also dead. Do you have a problem creating believable female characters, is that why you kill them off?

D.M. My own mother loved *Jack the Bear* when she read it, but she would follow me around the house asking, "Isn't it interesting, you kill the mother? Why did you kill the mother, Dan?" I think I said, "I don't do mothers. I don't know how. Mothers are such beautiful, breathtaking beings, far be it from me to try to present one on the page." I don't know. My books — what are there, eight novels? — all of them are told from a different point of view except *Bluebird Canyon*, which I botched the first time and did again as *Triphammer*, which was the original title of *Bluebird Canyon*. My narrators range from a 26-year-old black guy in my first novel, where I fooled even black reviewers — they called me "Brother McCall,"

thinking I was black (we didn't put my photo on the jacket) — to a 19th-century Presbyterian minister, a cop, and a doctor on an Indian reservation. But I'll tell you one thing I could never do, and that is tell a story from a woman's point of view. I wouldn't know where to begin.

J.D. The novel *Jack the Bear* has a gritty ending with Jack, having realized he is the adult in the family, swearing that the summer he reaches sixteen, he's going to Europe, "and that's final, Scout's fucking honor." What did you think of the upbeat movie ending, whose message is quite different?

D.M. Right now that's in flux. They may reshoot the last three minutes of the movie. It's not that upbeat, it's a ray of hope in a dark landscape. But then again, the ending, "Scout's fucking honor," is verbal. How could you possibly end a movie with that? Also, Hollywood's general tendency is to think that downbeat endings make artistic, but commercially unsuccessful, movies, that the audience won't like the film if they can't go out of the theater whistling the theme song. Actually, Steve Zaillian, the guy who wrote the screenplay, found a pretty good compromise.

J.D. What actor do you see as *Triphammer* — Nick Nolte?

D.M. Well, we've been worrying about that. I asked the original *Triphammer* — the real Ithaca policeman who tells the story — who he wanted to play him and he said, "It's a shame Clark Gable's dead." I don't think Trip should be a prettyboy. I think he should clearly be a middle-aged man with rough edges.

J.D. Dustin Hoffman? Gene Hackman?

D.M. Hackman, a wonderful actor, is 60. Too old. I like Dustin Hoffman because he never does bad work — a very high level of achievement for a movie actor. I like Harrison Ford. It won't be Danny DeVito. It'll probably be somebody out of the blue I never thought of.

J.D. Do you have any actress in mind who would be good as Sydney? Like Demi Moore or Julia Roberts? Kim Basinger?

D.M. Not Kim Basinger. Gosh.

J.D. You don't see her?

D.M. No. She's supposed to be just 28. There should be a significant mismatch of their ages.

J.D. What do you think Sydney — a beautiful 28-year-old college professor with a PhD — sees in *Triphammer*, an alcoholic 50-year-old cop with a high-school education, a problematic relationship with his teenage son, and health problems? What is the attraction there?

D.M. When you put it that way, I can't imagine. Well, Henry James said that no character is worth doing if you don't love him. I don't know how to write from the point of view of the "bad" narrator in the Jamesian sense. I've never done that and doubt I ever will. I mean, I loved *Triphammer* so I figured Sydney would too. I thought for all his problems and inadequacies he was essentially a good man, a strong and loving man, a sensitive man who never got the kind of education he wanted because of economic demands in his family when he was growing up. But he's a guy who loves knowledge and language and has a kind of intuitive sensitivity for it. His speech is very colorful and interesting, so I thought they'd be attracted to each other.

J.D. She teaches him that "book" is not necessarily a verb and he seems to kick the habit pretty easily.

D.M. If he doesn't quit, Sydney won't sleep with him. So there's no choice.

J.D. Which of your novels are you most and least satisfied with?

D.M. The most, I think, *Jack the Bear*. Somehow I got it right the first time. *Triphammer* seems to me about the same. And I like a little book of mine that never sold, *Beecher*, because it's all told in 19th-century rhetoric. My sister-in-law said she had to go to the dictionary twice on every page. But I liked it. I'm proud of the book I just finished that'll be out in about a year and a half. I don't like my first novel at all. I wrote it when I was 25 and you can tell it's by an apprentice writer. I'm sorry about *Bluebird Canyon*, the only long novel I've ever written. There's just too much in it. And then, just as I was getting ready to revise it, fix it, my mother died and the book had already been sold to the Literary Guild and I just couldn't go back and revise it; I couldn't pull it

into shape. I didn't write for about a year after Mom died. I think if I'd been able to go back and spend about six months working on it, I could have pulled it into shape, but in its present form it's a mess.

J.D. How do you think you have matured as a novelist? Like good bourbon?

D.M. I could drink when I wrote *Jack the Bear*, when I was 32. Now I'm 52, and I can't. I can't metabolize demon rum anymore. The last three books of mine don't have a drop of booze in them. Instead of sitting there late in the day with a little side-car, I sit there early in the morning with a cup of coffee. I teach a course at Cornell on three of my favorite American writers — Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner, all three notorious — one could almost say suicidal — alcoholics. Especially in Faulkner there are whole passages I can't read because of the bourbon fumes coming up from the page. When I teach this course I lecture at least three times on the alcoholism of the writers and I say, "You're crazy if you think alcohol made one word better in anything they did, and if you want to consider something else, ask the families what it was like to live with them." It's absolutely catastrophic. I used to think that if I didn't drink I'd "lose my music." Bullshit.

J.D. Has having two of your novels taken by the movies influenced the way you write? Do you feel yourself thinking cinematically as you write?

D.M. Very little, and when I try I do it very stupidly. **J.D.** I once had an argument with a very successful writer over the ethics of using real people for characters. She felt that everything is allowed to the writer including other people's private lives. What do you think about the ethics of writers using real people for their fiction?

D.M. I have a lot of complicated feelings about that. I love Philip Roth's work from *Goodbye Columbus* to *Patrimony*. I think he's a wonderful writer. Portnoy's *Complaint* is a joyous achievement. But something Roth said always bothered me: "Nothing bad can happen to a writer; it's all material." I feel that's a moral idiocy. I don't enjoy it when I recognize a real person in fiction. I get distracted. I think about the person instead of the story. The book I'm working on right now about family court in Ithaca — frequently when I go down and listen to the history of these dysfunctional families I feel like a predator. I feel that I'm profiteering on human anguish. The stories are so wild and interesting. I really enjoy all this unhappiness because it's so good for a compelling story. I guess I'll always worry about it.

J.D. Who is your favorite current author?

D.M. Probably John Updike. I can remember thirty years ago, when Norman Mailer took on six American novelists. He had Bill Styron and Jimmy Baldwin and Philip Roth and I forget who all, but he said the least impressive of these is John Updike. Then Mailer said something that I think is still true of John Updike's work, that whenever Updike gets in trouble he "writes." That is, filigree and stylistic flourish

is what carries the day rather than human emotion. But three of the four *Rabbit* books are magnificent. Still, he's never been a hero to me the way, alas, Hemingway was. I was in the YMCA in Tokyo on that July day in 1961 when Papa shot himself. I can see the whole thing so clearly. I loved his stories. He was the greatest living writer and certainly was a hero of my high-school and college career. I don't feel that way about Updike, but maybe that's because I'm older. You don't hero-worship the same way you do when you're young. But Updike is great. Eudora Welty is great.

J.D. What do you think is the greatest novel ever written?

D.M. *Anna Karenina*.

J.D. You recently wrote a book on "Bartleby the Scrivener." Do you get the same charge out of writing scholarly work that you do from writing novels?

D.M. It really is different, the way you sit down and physically do it. So different that, when I was in the middle of *Triphammer*, my editor at Cornell Press decided he wanted a preface to the "Bartleby" book, and it took me two weeks to write a three-page preface. I was in the head of *Triphammer*, trying to do his world as a novel, so I kept talking about the scholarly problems in Melville the way Trip would. It was bizarre. You know, when I disagreed with another Melville critic, I'd write, "Well, you don't need to read that shit." It was just so weird.

J.D. What are you currently working on?

D.M. I don't really like to talk about a work in progress. Writing for me is full of rituals and superstitions, like in baseball, you don't talk to a pitcher who has a no-hitter going. I feel a little that way when I'm writing a novel; I don't like to talk about it until it's all done and revised. I'm having an awfully good time doing it.

J.D. You're a California transplant. What is the biggest difference for you between living in California and living in Ithaca?

D.M. I go to California for the weather and come back to Ithaca for

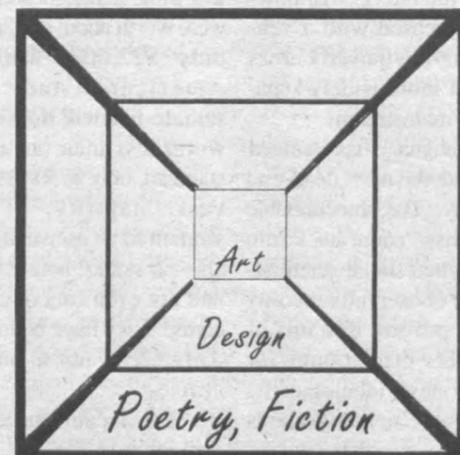
the people. California isn't the shock for me that it is for many Easterners. I was born there, grew up there, went to Stanford. My family was Californian going back three generations. L.A. to me is just a place. A sophisticated Easterner goes there and sees the end of civilization. But I do notice every time I go to California I'm shocked that there's nobody to talk to. Or, really, that talking doesn't seem to be a very popular activity. Everybody's got headphones on, nobody knows anything, and the weather's so warm and lovely. That's what Faulkner hated about it. He said, "Somebody tells you a leaf fell off a tree in the canyon and it's winter." When I come back to Ithaca one thing I notice is how crummy all the cars look, they've been through these winters with the salt and ice. In California everybody takes care of their cars, and the same is true of the people — all these bronze gods and goddesses, they keep up the equipment, maintain it. You come back here and everyone looks so pale and weary from the sheer effort of having gotten through the winter. But then I find that when I go to California many people don't realize I spent the first 22 years of my life there. I talk funny; I'm from the East.

J.D. Where do you see yourself ten years from now?

D.M. Alive. I hope. I was thinking of epitaphs this morning, not a good sign. In a drunken stupor I once told a friend that I wanted on my tombstone, "I knew this would happen." The same thing backwards. A former student of mine visited me recently, a guy I taught 25 years ago, a successful attorney in Detroit. When he left he said, "Well, take care of yourself. God knows you've tried everything else." I really have been reckless. Somebody once said, "If I'd known I'd live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself." I still find it enormously exciting to teach. I love to write. With any luck, in ten years I'll still be doing both.

Jane Dickinson is Assistant Professor in the Writing Program at Ithaca College.

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The Arc of the Covenant

Kathryn Howd Machan

MARS AND HER CHILDREN

by Marge Piercy

Alfred A. Knopf, 165 pp., \$11.00 paper

Calling for a covenant between elemental nature and the human realm, Marge Piercy's latest collection of poems takes as its central metaphor the rainbow. Readers familiar with Piercy's poetry and fiction (she is the author of 12 collections of poetry and of 11 novels, all still in print) are aware that she is often described as an "earthy" writer. Usually this adjective, celebrated by feminists, means she is bold and honest and witty in her depiction of the body and its hungers and that she embraces the autobiographical and the everyday — especially domestic and other work-related matters — as vital to poetry. These new poems continue her themes and style, but with an added strength and urgency.

Piercy has organized the 84 poems of *Mars and Her Children* into a prologue ("The Ark of Consequence") and seven sections, each taking its title from a color of the rainbow. It is appealing while reading the book to make connections among the poems within each section and find them enhancing each other, creating a distinct theme; the tart redness of "Apple Sauce for Eve," for example, in which the speaker says, "you and the snake shimmy up the tree./ lab partners in a dance of will and hunger," deepens in hue when joined with the raw crimson of "Blood Lake," which is "Ominous, bright with poison" as "The river/snaking into it steams." Even more compelling, however, is the underlying network of theme and imagery; almost all of the poems offer as subject or metaphor the three elements essential to creation: air, earth, and water.

Made of moisture and sunlight, a rainbow joins sky and horizon, reminder "that what we/toss out returns in the water table;/ flows from the faucet into our bones." It is fitting that almost a third of the poems focus on air, the place of this "boomerang of liquid/light." Wind, moon, twilight, the sound of a bell, a girl's piano music through an open window, a son's words to his father over a phone line, the whirling ice of a blizzard, the thunderstorm of a teacher trying to "flash electricity/in the slack pale faces" of students — again and again Piercy evokes an appreciation of the substance that works steadily on our senses, without which we would die. She talks of it, too, as the place of bodily movement for the dancer/poet, whose "leaps sustained on the music" are

etched upon imaginary air, that inner space
where minute galaxies spin and pulsate

toward implosion or explosion
beads of fiercely burning ecstatically combusting
light, the only source of heat
in the absolute zero of despairing silence.
("A Line of Dancers Through Time")

She is at her resplendent best in her celebratory poem, "In June All Things Wake Fully," with its sensual metaphors tumbling like the wild roses at its heart, redolent in the pure sun and moving air that awakens love and sexual hunger (see box).

Piercy's "earthiness" takes on greater dimensions in *Mars and Her Children*, for essentially the actual earth and its survival is her subject. Many of the poems talk of fauna and flora and land habitat — aspects of life very significant to the poet in her home-with-many-gardens in Wellfleet. Always she is aware, and works to make us aware, that the "big bosomed and tall" tree of life so many take for granted does indeed need us to "hold her fast":

We all flit through her branches or creep
through her bark, skitter over her leaves.
Yet we are the mice that gnaw at her root
who labor ceaselessly to bring her down.
When the tree falls, we will not rise as plastic
butterfly spaceships, but will starve as the skies

weep hot acid and the earth chafes into dust.
("For She Is the Tree of Life")

Against this depiction of Armageddon, however, Piercy places the exquisite "Persimmon Pudding." Inedible when perfect in appearance, the persimmon must wrinkle and dim before it achieves succulence:

You counsel patience, attunement with the seasons
and each act come to its fullness of time.
But mostly, O vermilion, you suggest a metaphor
for a woman a bit past ripe but sweeter
she swears for the touch of frost.

This collection also includes one of Piercy's best cat poems yet (and she is justly famous for them), a monologue titled "the Cat's Song," which on one level beautifully imagines a cat's offering to a human being and on another suggests Piercy's own offering to the readers of this book:

Love speaks me entire, a word
of fur. I will teach you to be still as an egg
and to slip like the ghost of wind through the grass.

The movements, energy, colors, and creatures of water inform a good portion of the poems, including the one from which the book's title is taken, "For Mars and Her Children Returning in March," about humpback whales. Living as she does on one of the edges of this continent, Cape Cod, Piercy is very familiar with the meeting of sea and sky and land and with the giant swimming mammal so important to our dreams and mythology. The whale that researchers have named Mars ("adopted" by Piercy in a fundraising campaign to save these animals) becomes for the poet a symbol of the survival for which she is praying and working; Mars's return each spring from the Caribbean means that life *can* continue, despite the powers of destruction. Piercy insists that

We must praise each humpback breaching, meet them
on the banks,
lurch over their feeding on sand lances, herring.
Each is a poet, a composer, a scholar of the roads
below. They are always singing, and what they know
is as alien to us as if they swim past Sirius....

If we cannot preserve the greatest of these
from our own greed, our carelessness,
then we will surely follow that shape of natural power
into the silence after its murdered song,
the sea whose hot heart has been stopped
lapping like heavy oil at beaches
where only plastic shards cast up on the stained sand.

Not all of the water images in the book are so directly prophetic, of course. Again Piercy surprises and delights, turning the usually uncomfortable sweat of August, for example, into a cause for jubilation, something that "eases our bodies together" in lovemaking so that

Waters flow over waters, currents melding.
Up from the rippled bottom an elbow juts,
a cockfish hunts the coral maze,
an anemone opens its fringed waving petals.
("Hot, Hotter")

Or, again looking to her body, she recalls Homer's winedark sea and wonders grimly about her own failing vision, what it might mean to swim through a dark harbor of days — metaphor for not only her personal possible future but that of a world carelessly allowing its water to be wasted and polluted so it may never again rise into a rainbow.

Other poems draw from human situations without any ostensible reference to nature (although the metaphors are always implicit), while yet others combine references to all three major elements, underscoring their interconnectedness.

In "Shad Blow," for instance, the speaker takes us back to the spring of her life when, in sulfurous Detroit under a blossoming cherry tree, she was "riddled/like a sieve with sharp sour desires/...to mark the world with something of mine." At the poem's end we see her in the present, living near the coast, her desires the kind that can be readily fulfilled because of the choices she has made, the wisdom she has gained:

Now I know I am in the seasons, of them.
The sun warms the upturned soil and my arm.
Spring moves through me like an armada of light.

Similarly, "The Possession" compares past and present as the speaker tells of years of reluctance to trust in homemaking and settling, and of the deeply satisfying change wrought through commitment:

I lived in eight cities building my chancy
nests high and low, able to set up temporary
housekeeping in a closet, abandoning used sofas
and tables as a hermit crab switches found shells.
Yet when I came here, I metamorphosed.
I grew down into this hill, tap-rooted deep.
I am made now out of water from this well
blood and tissue and bone. This land owns me.

Implicit in the poem is the suggestion that the earth requires the same kind of commitment from humankind if both are to continue beyond a transitory existence.

With her new book, Marge Piercy both warns against destruction and offers hope for salvation. "All living are one and holy, let us remember," she says in "Amidah: On Our Feet We Speak To You." Her poems make a rainbow that helps us do that remembering.

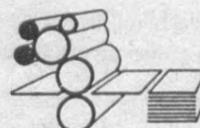
Kathryn Howd Machan's most recent book of poetry is *The Kitchen of Your Dreams* (Thorntree Press, 1992). She is Assistant Professor in the Writing Program at Ithaca College.

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Gil Williams, Prop.

Writer's Block

continued from page 2

extract. It was an attempt at an *Ars Poetica*. To cut the long into short, the piece climaxes in a jousting between The Imperturbables (Academics) and The Diffidents (Practising Artists).

The Joust

from **The 2nd Grand Confabulation of Drum C'at**

Commentator

I am speaking to you from high in the stand overlooking Drum C'at field, and I notice already something going on round the goal area of the Impertrubables, they seem to have brought on a small army of reserves, the Imperturbables have placed a wall of thesis-writers around their goal *completely* obscuring it! And now the referee has been hijacked by the Imperturbables and the game is on!... and straightaway there's a tussle right down under me between truth and power and as truth looks dangerously like interfering with power, the referee blows his whistle and penalizes the Diffidents who of course make no protest — and truth is bought off, suppressed, diverted, bullied, exterminated, and sent to bed without its supper.... And the referee has awarded four points and a guaranteed tenure & a pension to the Imperturbables inside their opponents' half who I am happy to say the Diffidents have retired not only ten yards but the entire length of the field and have altogether disappeared off the map, which in terms of their own self-effacing ethic means they have carried the day! A mighty cunning subterfuge, what they are plainly saying to the Imperturbables is...

Horse (as Diffident)

Ye're not worth playing against.

Commentator

And considerable confusion now appears to rule on the field of play, with large areas of learning and play-school being cordoned off by theses and parameter setters, who have spread out from the Imperturbable goal and seem to be totally unaware that there is no longer any opposition on the field...! and there is no sign of the Diffidents now but I do notice an enormous Wooden Horse standing all by itself in what used to be the Diffident goal area! And now we see that the Imperturbables have very rapidly been erecting a large double rampart round the main jousting space, an oval construction which encloses most of the playing area, and a very prettily patterned and

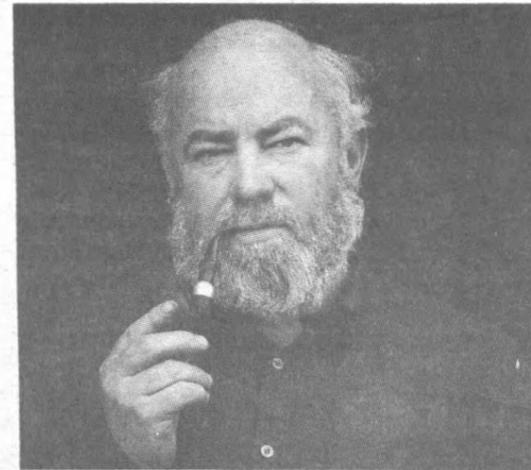
sturdy fortification it looks indeed and they are working away like beavers, and they will soon have finished this impressive redoubt of pure literary theory because the walls are made with cartons of theses and dissertations which they have taken off the wagons, and big thick ramparts they are, made up of millions upon millions of big thick words such as academics use because it is in their interest to do so! — if anybody knew what they were about they wouldn't need to be there to explain themselves and they would be out of a job! — and my goodness they've certainly done great work here, no question but that this redan, this star fortress has walls of a critical thickness that will resist all efforts by the generality of humankind to penetrate or comprehend! And now I see another pattern beginning to emerge, an overview of the whole construction shows that it is coming to resemble the outline of an enormous official Crown or Seal, a spectacular design, a wonderful piece of spontaneous planning...! And now before closing up the circle or oval rather completely the Imperturbables are wheeling in the Great Wooden Horse, which they obviously intend will stand in the center of their grand design, a splendid piece of opportunism on their part...

Horse (as himself)

That's Me! Horse! One of ours! Hi for Tíreragh!

Commentator

And the Horse is now standing in the absolute center of the enclosure as the symbol and metaphorical consummation of the whole takeover; the arena presents now the appearance of a hugely magnified Official Seal, and the Imperturbables are standing up on the crenellated ramparts and acknowledging the plaudits of the wildly enthusiastic crowd; and now they break out a string of gilded lettering between the two layers of rampart and the lettering says: ROYAL OFFICIAL IMPERTURBABLE ACADEMIC TRADITION RULES OK? IT'S OFFICIAL! and the stands roar their appreciation, can you believe it? And there is no sign of the opposition... This is what literature is all about and we've got it all sewn up, what a comprehensive statement. And they're waving to the crowd and it is plain that the day belongs to the Imperturbables. After a very disappointing display



from their opponents...But now behind them something truly in keeping with the spirit of official pageantry has occurred and a door in the side of the Wooden Horse has opened and what looks like a small army of yes former Diffidents is climbing out and sitting on the grass and beginning to eat its picnic lunch with every appearance of unconcern and the ACADEMICS HAVEN'T EVEN NOTICED! The Royal Imperturbable Academics are still standing for their official standing ovation and they don't know what's going on behind them! ...And we're going to try and get a directional mike in on the conversation of those picnicking Diffidents... **Horse** (as Diffident) Have you a light Horse? Matches? Let's have a dek. Never saw them before. Awful big kind. Satires. A new old make. Guaranteed to strike — but what on? The box would never stand it. Try that big wall over there.

Commentator

And one of the Diffidents is now strolling over undetected to the inner wall of the ramparts and is, yes he is about to, he's striking a match! On the wall! One of his enormous satire matches! And... Whoosh! it's burning like tinder, the whole caboodle of ramparts has gone up in flames and is self-destructing and blazing away, in an instant the whole double ring of dissertation and commentary is on fire and is disappearing and the Academic Imperturbables ARE RUNNING FOR THEIR LIVES back to the anonymous shelter of the crowd as their entire life's work, the artificial the solidly pretentious the obscurantist and the merely obscure, vanishes teetotally in a puff of flame and smoke and hot air. And the Diffident Satirist is now to be seen mooching back to join the picnic in the middle of the field and I don't believe he knows what he's done at all. And now the smoke has vanished and everything can be seen clearly, and the Academic it is evident has no job when there is no longer anything obscure for him to explain. He withers, wilts, melts away like a well-salted slug. And the area he was protecting from the general public is now in the hands of Diffidents who are making it free and available to all....

Solid Ground

from *Solid Ground*, page 7

From his window, the poet is left to contemplate his loss, the fact of his having taken his lover "for granted, for something/ You were not." Love and its labors give way to

...the rude December quiet

To the nothing

The stillness

The cold encroaching:

A few dead branches, the silent contumely

Of winter

In "Trailhead," he takes us to the massiveness of feeling that dwells in a deteriorating bear carcass:

Again & again in the early mornings we would Walk by him, see him gray and flintashen in The first light...

...Then one day he was only bones, as if the night Had stripped him of his bloodless fetor, as if His skin & fur & coloration were things the ground Had called for, sucked in.

Though Muskat delights in the metaphysical, the speculative, all of his poems bring us back to earth, to the palpable "thump/ Of solid ground." He keeps seeking proof of some corporeal existence against the pull of the unknown. In "Plumb Lines," the invisible makes itself known to him, and he exults:

What's not looked for cuts a figure in beauty's algorithmic function,

what's invisible contributes to a charming natural heft:

You uphold darkness to unfold it then venture well inside:

see what unfurlings & strange textures mark my netherworld of things?

Even the darker side of nature becomes a boon to the poet's seeing. In the same poem he delves into and dissects the details of nature's underworld—"frail quilts of outlaw/ maggots out heating up/ a dead robin's furrowed belly"; "dark bands of bloodthick leeches/ thronging under bright waterturtle shells..." The maggots are "heating up" the robin's belly but by the end of the poem they have become the fabric, the "strange textures" of the poet's "netherworld" from which emerges his measured, musical utterance — "murmurs from the bogswamp's gloaming":

Poetry breathes in the shadows: All sound, I say

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continued from page 5

a flat but definitely female voice, like a benign version of HAL. For the revisionist *Star Trek*, issues of difference between humans and machines are a matter of daily life, of the same order and interest as differences between human cultures, the overarching mission of the spacefaring Earthmen and Earthwomen of the future. Artificial intelligence and artificial life, whether as doubles, others, or Others, occupy places on the center stage of late 20th-century subjectivity.

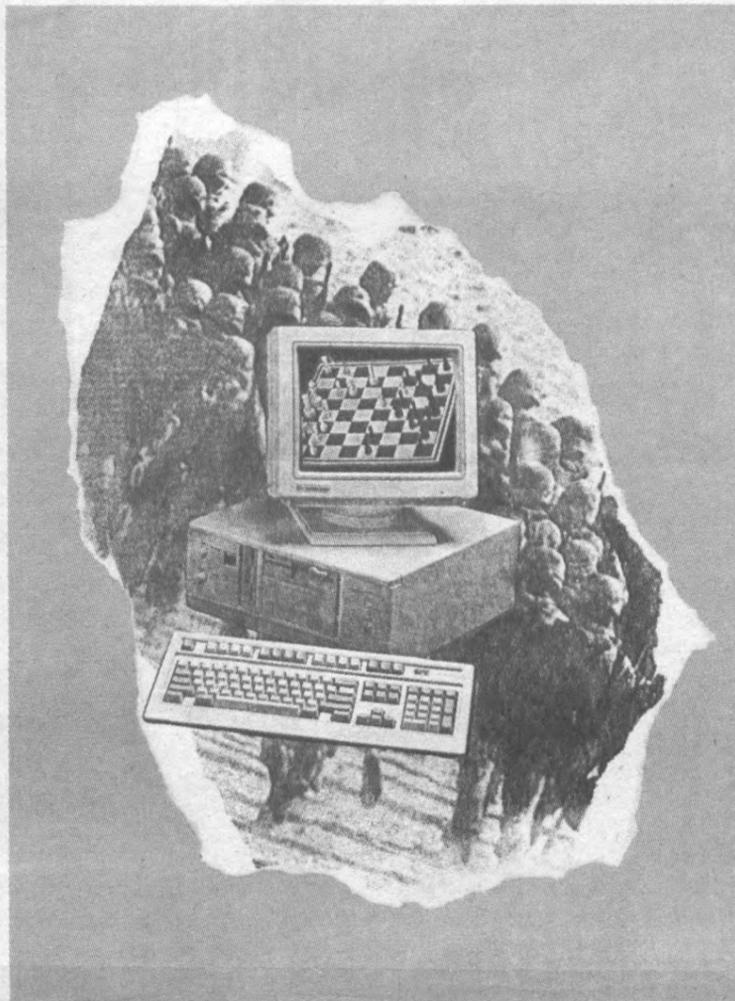
The first half of the 1980s was also the height of what Fred Halliday has called the "second Cold War." Ronald Reagan was elected president on a turning political tide following the humiliating Iran hostage crises. Reagan's first term in office was marked by the appointment of dubiously qualified ideologues like James Watt and Anne Gorsuch Burford to high administrative posts, a massive resurgence of Cold War rhetoric, and major increases in military spending. During this period the Pentagon attempted to severely restrict trade and scientific communication in broadly defined defense-sensitive areas, including advanced computing. Reagan ordered toy-war skirmishes in Grenada and Libya designed to flex American muscle on the global stage, though his attempt to throw American weight around in the cauldron of the Middle East (the Marine peace-keeping force in Lebanon) ended in a scurrying retreat.

Reagan's was also the most popular presidency in history.

In 1983, Reagan proposed the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI, known popularly as "Star Wars," an appellation of more than minor significance), his plan for a total space-based nuclear missile defense built with super-high-technology weapons. The lesser known but related Strategic Computing Initiative, a major and highly controversial program of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency in advanced computing and artificial intelligence, was announced in the autumn of the same year.

Star Wars pre-empted the powerful Nuclear Freeze movement that had threatened to steal the thunder

from Reagan's Cold War revival. The most advanced computers and computer software ever constructed would be a *sine qua non* of any such system, and the SDI channeled vast new Pentagon funding into computer research. Revelations of a long and long-secret history of computer failures in NORAD missile-control computer systems, some of them serious, emerged in 1980, sparking public fears of computer-initiated



collage: Kathy Morris

holocaust like those dramatized in *War Games* and *The Terminator*, as well as in novels and films of the first Cold War era such as *Fail-safe* (1962, made into a film in 1964) and *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). In the early 1980s, Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility was founded around opposition to aspects of Star Wars and Strategic Computing, marking the first organized politicization of computer experts.

At least until the middle of Reagan's second term in office, American anxiety about nuclear war

and ideological polarization with Communism reached heights they had not seen since the 1950s. The much-remarked science-fictional, movie-script quality of Reagan's "leadership," especially in the military arena, only served to heighten his extraordinary popularity. The American public may not have been completely taken in by Reagan's "peace shield" idea, but polls showed many were moved and invigorated

by it. At this writing, Star Wars continues — even in the climate of President Bush's "New World Order" — to command widespread support, albeit with a new direction toward regional rather than global defense.

At a press conference during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, General Norman Schwarzkopf played videotapes of a computer-controlled, laser-guided bomb destroying a

building in Baghdad. In that moment, a worldwide television audience experienced the joining of the subjectivity of the second self with the politics of the closed world. As we rode the eye of the bomb to the white flash-of-impact, in the eerie virtual reality of the TV image, we experienced at once the elation of technological power, the impotence and voyeurism of the passive TV audience, and the blurring of boundaries between the "intelligent" weapon and the political will. American audiences saw "smart" computers embodied in weapons, proto-Terminators, seeking out targets and destroying them with awesome force and fully-hyped "precision." The dazzling — and terrifying — power of high-technology warfare displayed in the sound-bite war in the Gulf became an emblem for the glories of America's waning global hegemony: the automated second self as the psychology of closed-world politics.

This moment is a convenient icon for my central argument: that in the computer age, theories, beliefs, and fictions about mind, intelligence, and selfhood must be understood as having a political sense. They reflect a political and technical history involving new forms of warfare, militarism, a pervasive technological system, and the global development of capitalism and its culture. So, too, the political constellation of the post-WWII era must be understood as involving the subjectivity of mental machines. Particular conceptions of choice, emotion, gender, and democratic process, shaped in part by the instrumental rationality and powerful data analysis of computing, have played major roles in government decisions, military trends, and the reconstruction of political culture since 1945. The argument of this book, then, views three apparently disparate histories — the history of American global power, the history of computing machines, and the history of subjectivity — through the lens of the American political imagination. The links are partial, sometimes contradictory. Nevertheless they are real.

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Roses

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chair with roses all over it," Williams says, "to attest to that quality of my childhood that I often say is best described by the phrase 'bread and roses.'" Williams explains that the phrase originates from a song written for and sung by the striking women of the textile mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts, around 1928. "What the women were struggling for was not just bread to feed their families, but for a chance to have some beauty and joy in their overworked lives."

Vera Williams' work has been described as "an honest, celebratory portrait of the working class." But she is quick to say that she doesn't consciously sit down to write a "social issue" book. Opening *Music, Music for Everyone* to a joyful



double-page dance scene, Williams asks, "where do you see people of color dancing together this way? This is not realism; this is what I create, my vision." Rosa has been described as Hispanic. "Did I paint her Hispanic?" Acknowledging that her political and social convictions as well as her "well-preserved sense

of childhood" influence her writing, she states that she is motivated by "an emotion engine: to capture the 'emotional essence' of a story. 'Where do the characters come from? It is a mystery....'"

I ask Williams what is next for her. She describes a book she wrote for older children that will be published soon. *Scooter* is about a young girl and her relationship with a little boy she babysits who can speak but doesn't. "She does tricks for him on her scooter." All her illustrations for the book are in black and white. "You know," she says, "I did a paper at Black Mountain College on how all the colors can be found in black."

Even, I think, as we end laughing, the color of roses.

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City Limits

continued from page 15
 have been rendered obsolete. This blue-collar decline has been particularly harmful for African Americans and other people of color.

Industrial decline has been matched by neighborhood decline. In response to the large outflow of funds and the general poverty of neighborhoods, landlords stopped maintaining their properties, while still withdrawing capital in the form of rent. Public housing has nowhere made up the deficit, nor was it ever intended to make up for lost jobs and incomes.

Money from city residents also flows out as they buy products and services that are made and provided elsewhere. Even retail and wholesale establishments, formerly in the hands of residents, are not usually locally owned; what businesses there are tend to be owned by non-residents. In addition, the exodus from the inner cities of the African-American (and Latino) middle class, whose mobility is no longer restricted by formal residential segregation, has greatly exacerbated the social isolation evident today. This middle class furnished the role models and providers—doctors, teachers, lawyers, dentists, preachers, and local entrepreneurs—the class of people who in any community maintain the institutions and act as a deterrent to aberrant behavior. In short, when they left, they took that stability with them. Ironically, it was after court-ordered desegregation in the mid-1960s that the condition of most African-American families wors-

ened, making their plight look like problems of race rather than problems of poverty and isolation.

III. Conflicts of Class

As if the situation were not bad enough, with racism, suburban theft, and inner-city neglect piled one upon the other, the 1980s arrived with a new scourge: reactionary leadership acting in response to a new and threatening set of conditions in the global economy. This right-wing response to heightened international competition is the third cause of America's deep social divisions. As even some of its promoters now admit, the Reagan-Bush White House in the 1980s did not fight poverty, but instead promoted it. Republican tax laws, budgets, and regulatory changes rewarded the rich and punished the poor. Democrats did little to stop the onslaught.

George Bush's initial remarks after the Los Angeles riots, assigning the blame for inner-city ills to the prior expansion of social programs and calling for the revival of the bankrupt enterprise zone idea by otherwise closeted HUD Secretary Jack Kemp, would be laughable were the implications not so serious. Thirty to forty years of mild but general social progress, while camouflaging the inequality and racial isolation spawned by suburbanization and reinforced by racism, had made some small dents in the armor of U.S. poverty. The list of these limited successes, sponsored by the Democrats with the aid of liberal Republicans and enlight-

ened corporate leaders, was never very long, but nevertheless should be noted.

The expanding Social Security program with allied health benefits

military buildup. In short, there was a brief American Century, from the New Deal to the Great Society, that responded partially to labor and the populist protest vote.

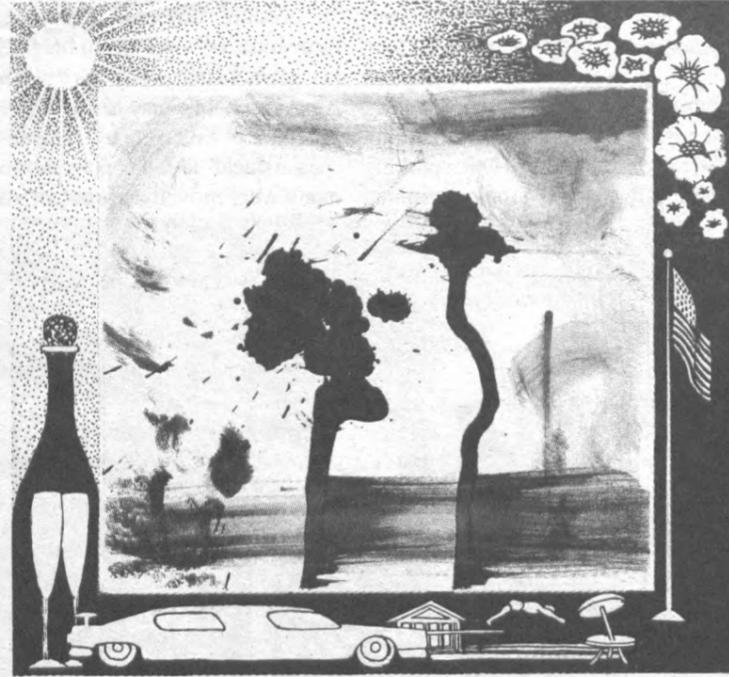


illustration: Benn T.F. Nadelman

worked to remove the worst conditions of poverty from the elderly: more than one in three were poor as recently as 1959; in 1989 the rate was about one in ten. Massive expansion of school and university programs, including everything from the GI Bill to Head Start, improved and greatly widened access to education. The creation of a giant physical and scientific infrastructure made America the leader of the world economy—even if much spending was misdirected into a

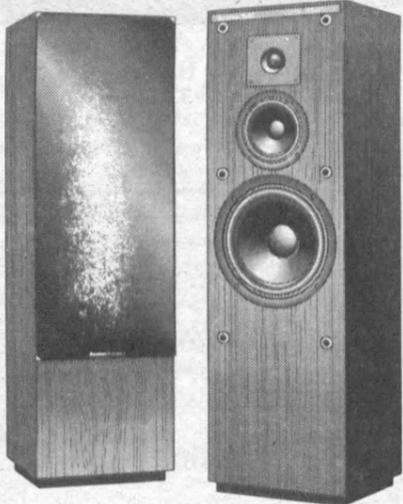
Los Angeles riots stands this history on its head. After a decade of private theft and lax enforcement of regulations that caused the near trillion-dollar failures and bailouts of savings & loans and banks, the latest portion of responsibility for inner-city conditions clearly belongs to the conservative Republicans, a result of their gross mismanagement of the domestic economy.

IV. A Future of Urban Riots?

It is an open question whether American society, given its fascination with permissive deregulation and privatization, can effectively respond to the combined effects of long-term racial bias, pervasive inner-city abandonment, and negligent economic policies. As long as biased ideological constructs based on race and class dominate the political debate, allowing leaders to rationalize the mal-distribution of income and wealth, the society will continue to be sharply divided, poverty will overwhelmingly afflict people of color, and what happened in Los Angeles may prove to be only a tremor on the seismic scale of social catastrophe.

William Goldsmith teaches City and Regional Planning at Cornell and is the author (with Edward Blakely) of "Separate Societies: Poverty and Inequality in U.S. Cities."

Rachel Maryam Muhammad teaches political economy in the Department of Politics at Ithaca College.



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