

The BOOKPRESS

THE NEWSPAPER OF THE LITERARY ARTS

Volume 5, Number 1 February 1995

Ithaca, New York

FREE



INSIDE: Interview with writer Helena Viramontes, page 10

Letters to the Editor

LaCapra Responds

To the Editor:

Despite the fact that it exposes me to predictably histrionic responses (I am tempted to write one myself!), I would like to make a few comments about the reviews of my book, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (The Bookpress, December 1994). I am especially puzzled by the fact that my book was given two reviews even though the reviews, despite noteworthy differences of tone, do not generate marked divergences of perspective. Indeed the reviewers would seem to have similar preconceived ideas about history and an evident hostility to critical theory. They would also seem to have ignored the express intent of my book to explore certain aspects of the aftermath of the Holocaust on the level of the problem of representation, notably (as the preface explicitly states) "the historians' debate over ways of representing the Shoah, the attempt to historicize extreme events, responses to the discovery of Paul de Man's World War II journalism, the implications of Heidegger's Nazi turn for the readings of his texts, and the role of Holocaust testimonies in historical interpretation" (p. xii). And as the introduction explicitly adds: "It should of course go without saying that what follows is in no sense an attempt at anything approximating a comprehensive account of the Holocaust or uses and abuses of it. *Vis-a-vis* those engaged in these important projects, I at most examine some important approaches to problems and attempt to bring out issues that may prove thought-provoking. While in no sense reducing these projects to the status of mere examples, I also attempt to touch on ways in which research into the Shoah may pointedly raise certain questions about the relation between history and theory" (p. 16).

In Sanford Gutman's case, one might justifiably refer to prejudice in the sense of a negative pre-judgment based on unexamined, avowedly "common-sensical" stereotypes, notably a stereotype of me as a "postmodern deconstructionist." This labeling not only lumps me with others whose writings Gutman drastically bowdlerizes. It makes Gutman unable to read and understand what is quite clearly written in my book. Indeed I would suggest that what Gutman apparently finds "impenetrable" is not something written in an obscure or esoteric style. It is something that may admittedly be difficult precisely because it does not conform to prejudicial stereotypes and generates marked resistances—as well as ambivalent "fascination"—in someone whose mind has already been made up by those stereotypes. Hence what Gutman calls "fascinating" theory (approximated to a femme fatale or perhaps in an even more surreptitious fashion to "fascinating fascism"?) cannot "penetrate" the manly armor of Gutman's preferred "conventional, common-sense historical methodology."

Gutman manifests a pronounced animus against critical theory and has a preconceived idea of my approach as "postmodern deconstructionism" (that is, as some unrecognizable, disconcerting object that he must name in a prejudicial way). Gutman is unable to think around his stereotypes to arrive at a more accurate understanding of what my book is trying to do. The result, even in his somewhat less hostile interludes (such as the indication of my "fascinating analysis of the 'sacrificial' and 'sublime' elements in Nazi ideology"), is comparable to a music review by someone who is tone-deaf.

For openers, in my book I am obviously not trying to write a standard history of the Shoah. I am attempting to provide a historically informed, theoretical perspective that sheds critical light on how such histories have been and could conceivably be written.

Now one may well prefer standard histories of the Shoah to attempts to bring history and theory into mutually provocative contact, but one cannot judge the latter with respect to criteria that apply to the former. (If you want a cow, buy a cow. Do not try to milk a horse.) Furthermore, my theoretical position in the book is not that of "postmodern deconstructionism." Postmodernism and deconstruction are precisely at issue in the book. The two are not lumped together, nor is either simply dismissed in Gutman's cavalier, indiscriminate manner. But each is placed in question in specific ways. Such a questioning requires inquiry into their *raisons d'être* and the significant, challenging contributions their proponents make. One result of my approach is to render dubious the use of stereotypes and simplistic labels (such as "postmodern deconstructionism") in characterizing approaches, including my own. In any event, with respect to postmodernism I write: "If one is to critically reinscribe modernism and postmodernism, one may begin by pointing to the role of the Holocaust as one problematic, often repressed (which may also mean canonized) point of rupture between the two. Postmodernism has developed in the wake of the Shoah, which it has often explicitly avoided, typically encrypted, and variably echoed in traumatized, melancholic, manically ludic, opaque, and at times mournfully elegiac discourses" (pp. 221-22). One may claim that this comment is itself too reductive, but it is difficult to see how it could be converted in a reviewer's mind into advocacy or unqualified celebration of postmodernism.

I would also note in passing that Saul Friedlander, to whom Gutman favorably refers and implicitly contrasts with me, is uniformly opposed neither to recent critical-theoretical tendencies in general nor to my own approach in particular. In fact, in his introduction to the book to which Gutman refers, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), Friedlander asserts: "I would agree with Dominick LaCapra that in this case [representing the Holocaust] the problem of 'transference' is indeed more widespread and complex by far than for most other historical events, and is not limited to the contemporaries of those years" (p. 4). Moreover, Friedlander has written of *Representing the Holocaust* itself that my "use of psychoanalytic concepts and critical theory for the historical representation of the Holocaust is intellectually brilliant and challenging as well as attuned to the self-reflection demanded from the historian by the very nature of the subject."

I quote Friedlander not simply to contrast his views with Gutman's or to gratify my own ego. (These would of course be reasons enough.) I do so particularly to indicate the open-mindedness of an important historian of the Shoah and his willingness to engage the problem of the relation between critical theory and the writing of history. I do not pretend to be a historian of the Shoah in the sense of someone doing empirical, archival research, and my book is explicitly presented as a series of reflections on the question of representing limit-cases or extreme events of which the Holocaust is an overwhelming example (but not simply an example). But my book is centrally concerned with problems in understanding the Holocaust that are in no sense restricted to me, and my approach is utterly misconstrued as "subjective"—in stark opposition to "objective"—history. Nor do I make in my own undivided voice a self-interested statement Gutman mistakenly attributes to me: "We awaken the dead in order to interrogate them about what we are interested in" (p. 33). I manifestly situate this statement within a perspective that I do not share as I elaborate a critique of opposed positions in an attempt to work out a different way of understanding historiography. (Here Gutman would profit

from closer attention to problems in reading.) What I do defend is a complex combination of reconstructing or contextualizing past phenomena and entering into a dialogic exchange with them. The goal here is a new idea of objectivity which is not a simple given or an assumed characteristic of professional historiography from which historians may deviate through unavoidable "bias." Objectivity would rather be a limited but important goal that one strives for precisely by checking projections, testing present interests against the ways of the past and other societies, and working through our necessary involvement in, or "transfere[n]tial" relations to, what we study.

Hence my book is not narrowly about "me" grappling with or celebrating "it" ("postmodern deconstructionism" or whatever), as Gutman misleadingly avers. But it does address the question of subjectivity in history-writing and the problematic relation—including the difficult choices—among pronouns in the historian's use of language. Like some others in the recent past, I use the term "subject-position" because I am not referring to subjectivity but to the crucial interaction between subjectivity and social positions. The concept of subject-position situates identity as a problematic articulation of contestable, possibly transformable subject-positions. The reason I use such a non-common-sensical, even jargonistic term like "subject-position," although I see its limitations, is that I am even more dissatisfied with "common-sensical" notions of identity that often rely on unexamined assumptions, stereotypes, labeling, and prejudice. Contrary to Gutman's assertion, I am, moreover, not interested in "history as therapy." I explicitly state that I want to take psychoanalysis away from a therapeutic ethos and make altogether explicit its relation to normative—ethical and political—problems that were often obscured in Freud and are typically avoided or inadequately addressed in conventional historiography. One may disagree with my arguments here, but they are stated with insistence and clarity.

A basic argument in my book is that, until quite recently, poststructuralism in general and deconstruction in particular have paid insufficient—or at best excessively indirect—attention to the Shoah as their own "traumatic" condition of possibility. The consequence has often been a restriction of theoretical options to a critique of "totalizing" or absolutist approaches, on the one hand, and, on the other, a marked tendency to stay within trauma and its post-traumatic effects through strategies of fragmentation, sustained indirection, decentering, and more or less lucid fixation on the problem of trauma as well as its transvaluation in the sublime. Within limits, I agree with the critique of "totalization" and relate "totalization" to the problem of scapegoating. And (*pace* Gutman) I do not believe that one can simply get over transference. Nor do I claim to transcend trauma and acting-out. In fact I argue that, even in the writing of history, one must allow trauma to register and be suspicious of conventional mellifluousness and complacency (including their stylistic forms), most notably with respect to extreme phenomena. (Hence my penchant for an essayistic style that Gutman finds "disjointed and overlapping.") I even argue that one must recognize the differential necessity of "acting-out" in the way different groups come to terms with extreme events or limit-cases.

While in no sense rejecting the necessity of extensive empirical research and the value of other standard techniques of traditional historiography, I do raise questions about the adequacy of what Gutman avowedly defends: a common-sensical, conventional, not to say pedestrian history, at least with respect to limit-cases. (Such history should not be conflated with minimalism as an explicit strategy of representation.) Still, I affirm the desirability of attempting

to work through problems critically in a fashion that expands the field of possibilities and counteracts the tendency to act problems out in a compulsively repetitive manner. Of course I do not provide an inclusive and exhaustive definition of "working-through"—something that would undercut the very meaning and purpose of the concept. But I try to place the problem of reviving and rethinking the concept on the agenda and at least try to provide some insight into—or working definition of—it. Aside from comments throughout the book, the entire last chapter is addressed to this issue.

Harvey Fireside also seems to have wanted—or even expected—me to write a more conventional history of the Holocaust that would go over well-worked ground, such as the antecedents of Nazi antisemitism. (On the latter issue, see, for example, Peter Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria*, revised ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), and the collection of documents in Richard S. Levy, *Antisemitism in the Modern World: An Anthology of Texts* (Lexington, Massachusetts, and Toronto: D.C. Heath and Company, 1991).) But Fireside nonetheless makes some attempt to address certain issues I raise in my book, and his review does not adopt the snide tone evident in Gutman.

The one question I would raise is whether Fireside's own "subjective," first-person introductory comments about his relatives have to be related to larger questions and framed in certain ways if they are not to function in the equivocal manner I suggest may be operative in similar comments in Arno Mayer's book (for example, to authenticate one's own opinions or arguments and to disqualify or marginalize those of others without comparable "experience"). I would also underscore my insistence in *Representing the Holocaust* on the problem of unintentionally repeating the dubious aspects of what one studies in one's own discourse and the need for special vigilance in discussing highly charged problems. Thus I find grating Fireside's last sentence which is at the least somewhat insensitive. ("Yet historians such as LaCapra raking over the ashes can serve to sensitize us to the possibility of steering between silence and endless repetition.")

—Dominick LaCapra
Ithaca

more Letters to the Editor, page 4

The BOOKPRESS
THE NEWSPAPER OF THE LITERARY ARTS

Publisher: Jack Goldman

Editorial: Jack Goldman and Joel Ray

Managing Editor: Ben Goodman

Design and Production: Ben Goodman

Production Assistants: Ira Apfel, Worth Godwin

Advertising Accounts Executive: Ben Goodman

Contributing Interns: Dan Collins, Russell Underwood

Distribution: Ben Goodman

Contributors:
Kenneth Evett, Gunilla Feigenbaum, Harvey Fireside,
Charlotte Greenspan, Richard Klein, Janice Levy,
Kevin Murphy, Michael Serino, Mark Shechner,
Ted Underwood, Gail Holst-Warhaft

Art:
Milly Acharya, Andrew Pogson,
Joanna Sheldon, Jack Sherman

The entire contents of THE BOOKPRESS are copyright ©1995 by THE BOOKPRESS, INC.. All rights reserved. THE BOOKPRESS will not be liable for typographical error or errors in publication, except the cost to advertisers for up to the cost of the space in which the actual error appeared in the first insertion.
Subscription rate is \$12.00 per year. THE BOOKPRESS is published eight times annually, February through May and September through December.
Submissions of manuscripts, art, and Letters to the Editor should be sent, SASE, to:

THE BOOKPRESS, DeWitt Building
215 N. Cayuga Street, Ithaca, NY 14850
(607) 277-2254; FAX (607) 275-9221

1994 Elections—The Color of Money

John Marciano

Historian Paul Gagnon claims that "the great, critical choices affecting all of our lives have been and are made in the political arena. The central human drama is there." The November 1994 midterm elections are part of that drama.

The mass media contend that the elections represent a decided shift to the right, a Republican "revolution" and "political earthquake" based on the desire for tougher solutions to crime, cuts in welfare spending, and the deepening anxiety of the middle class. Conservative analyst Kevin Phillips shows that the wealthy elite has made immense economic gains since the late 1970s at the expense of ordinary working people and the poor. Incomes have grown by more than \$800 billion since 1979, and 98 percent of this has gone to the upper fifth (with half going to the richest 2 percent); the remaining 80 percent of the population shared a pathetic 2 percent growth. Middle class anger and anxiety over this trend have made more people susceptible to demagogic attacks on the poor and other right-wing strategies because there appears to be no viable progressive alternative.

Polling data for the House of Representatives, however, reveal no Republican "revolution" and "stampede" to the right. The Republicans won by a 51-49 percent margin, with 39 percent of the eligible voters casting ballots. Most voted against the Democrats and not for the Republican/conservative agenda, and 75 percent had not even heard of the "Contract for America." One-third of these are self-identified Republicans and 8 percent are fundamentalist Christians. While it might portend a much deeper political move to the right, the "stampede" itself represents about 20 percent of the electorate.

One way to analyze the recent elections is to examine a concrete issue as representative of the political debate in the country; I have chosen welfare. The mean spirit of this debate is reflected in assaults on the poor, especially those in the federal Aid to Families With Dependent Children program (AFDC). Welfare-bashing illuminates underlying attitudes to poverty that are shared by both major parties, as the Republicans' attack on welfare recipients is different from the Democrats' in degree only—a commonality that was noted by *The New York Times*:

After a campaign in which voters rewarded a barrage of anti-welfare attacks, both parties are...repeating stern promises to make recipients work...[They] appear ready to cut benefits, increase work obligations and provide fewer protections for the 14.3 million people who rely on [AFDC]. More than nine million of the recipients are children.

This attack, primarily on poor children, in the name of "reducing government" and taxes is belied by simple arithmetic—AFDC payments amount to \$16 billion, about 1 percent of the federal budget. Yet this reality has not prevented both parties from scapegoating the poor. Again the *Times*:

exploitation [of the poor] in this way has brought us to a cruel place where Americans of all political persuasions are finding it frighteningly easy to blame the poor for their own fate, even though that means condemning millions of children to poverty, hunger and hopelessness.

The Republican proposals are "a grotesque assault on the poor for the sake of honoring their ideological war on government," according to Ruth Sidel, author of *Women and Children Last*. She argues that we have moved in the past thirty years "from the War on Poverty to a war on poor women and children," and recent mass media commentary on the welfare poor bears her out. This war is based on many false beliefs: that

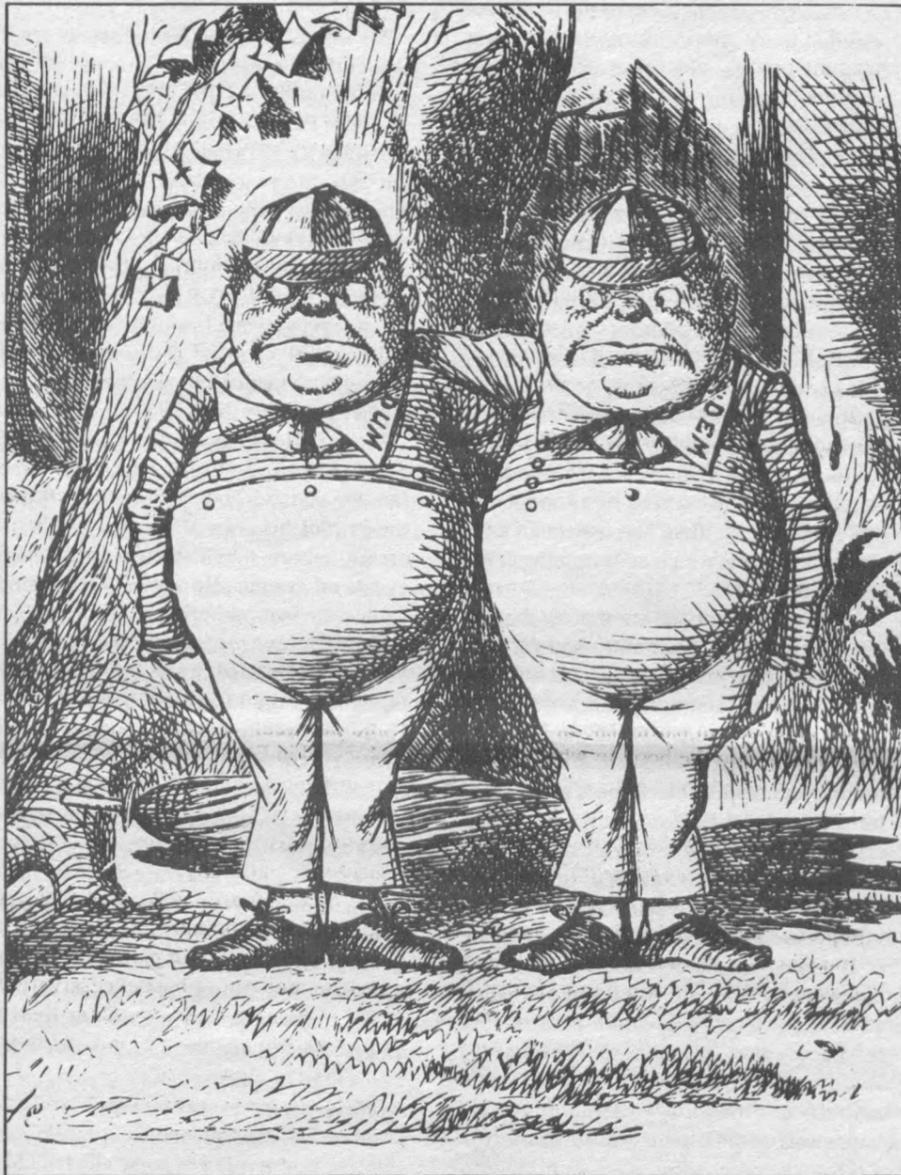
teenage women have children to get AFDC benefits; that they have more children to get greater benefits; that their present benefits enable them to live "comfortably"; and that they are dependent on welfare and "resist" getting a job. The facts are different: nearly two-thirds of AFDC recipients are children; the average welfare family has three members; in constant dollars, average benefits have fallen by 40 percent since 1970; combined benefits, including food stamps, barely equal the level of AFDC by itself in 1960; more than two-thirds of adult AFDC recipients have recently held a job; and finally, despite the myth that most AFDC recipients are African-American, they represent 37 percent of all AFDC cases, with whites some 39 percent.

The assault against AFDC mothers and

Newt Gingrich's harsh proposals for welfare—which have been roundly condemned—are not fundamentally different from Clinton's.

Neither Republican nor Democratic leaders appear concerned about the further deterioration in the health and well-being of US children that their "reform" proposals will entail. Yet, even without cutbacks, the World Health Organization predicted in 1990 that 400,000 US children will die from preventable causes during this decade. Most are born into poverty and a majority are black. Another study pointed out that

from 1980 to 1985...more children in the United States died as a result of poverty, hunger and malnutrition than the total number of US battle deaths in the Vietnam War.



(reprinted from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*, Knopf, 1992) John Tenniel

"Alice knew which was which in a moment, because one of them had 'DUM' embroidered on his collar, and the other 'DEM.'"

children is not the sole creation of the Republican right. As Robert Scheer of *The Los Angeles Times* points out, before the elections President Clinton called for a 2-year limit in which able-bodied people can receive AFDC benefits. That this rule and cuts in welfare payments will lead to increased homelessness did not change White House intentions. Moreover, Labor Secretary Reich's suggestion that the programs needed to get people off AFDC could be paid for by getting rid of tax breaks for the rich and corporations was immediately rejected by the Clinton White House. Instead of tapping these huge resources, welfare reform will be accomplished by cutting funds from other financially-strapped programs that aid the poor. Donna Shalala, Secretary of Health and Human Services, attacked the Republican welfare proposals, claiming that some five million children will be thrown off the rolls; but she also asserted that able-bodied women who refused to work should lose benefits and their children could be taken away by authorities and placed in foster or group care or put up for adoption. With more than nine million people officially unemployed, where will these jobs be found? It appears that some of

Attacks on "welfare" arouse so much passion, partly because they are rooted in racism, but also because of the mistaken ideology of rugged individualism which ignores how government subsidizes the middle class and the wealthy: the G.I. Bill after World War II; tax benefits for homeowners who pay mortgage interest; subsidized student loans; low-cost loans and tax abatement programs for business; public funds for highways and airports; and military contracts to corporations—the single greatest source of public welfare. Newt Gingrich's affluent Cobb County District in Georgia, home of the Pentagon welfare recipient Lockheed Aeronautical Systems, is the third highest suburban county recipient of federal aid in the US. Gingrich has been called the "country's leading advocate of the welfare state—for the rich." Despite the rhetoric against "big government," both Democrats and Republicans accept federal aid when it suits their interests.

Meanwhile, according to "The State of Working America," compiled by the Economic Policy Institute, real hourly wages for male high school graduates fell 20.2 percent between 1973 and 1993; for women the decline was 2.4 percent. In an article in *The*

New York Review of Books (January 12, 1995), James Fallows notes that

The US economy as a whole surged mightily over the last generation, roughly doubling in total output since the early 1970s. But because so much of the growth has gone to the richest Americans...the median US income has fallen (adjusted for inflation). In 1993 the US economy grew by 3 percent, but the median income of American families fell by 1 percent...What has been good for America in an abstract statistical sense has been bad for most Americans.

Some in the middle class who are hurt by the economy direct their anger and frustration at the poor, rather than at the 1/2 of 1 percent who own 45 percent of the nation's wealth. This misdirected rage has been carefully cultivated by right-wing broadcasters who attack "waste" in the welfare programs. But compared to the waste in other government programs, the welfare waste is as a leaking faucet to a flowing fire hydrant. There is huge waste in our military programs, the S&L bailout, and tax breaks for the rich, but when Republicans and Democrats attack welfare they ignore government handouts to the elite that exceed \$150 billion a year in tax breaks for oil and gas companies, textile quotas, and farm subsidies for agribusiness, to mention only a few.

The Republican right, with some echoes from the Democrats, asserts that it is ready to declare "war on big government," but two of the major items in the federal budget—interest on the debt (\$203 billion or 14 percent of the total budget) and the military (\$280 billion or 19 percent, which does not include the interest attributable to past wars, and hidden military funds in the budget)—will not be touched. Doug Henwood, writing in the *Left Business Observer*, believes that the Republicans' aims are clear: "the upward redistribution of income through state action." To this end, they will support the capital gains tax cut, most of the benefits going to taxpayers with incomes of \$100,000 and over.

In a political vacuum devoid of progressive alternatives, many voters are encouraged by the national media to look for easy and simplistic solutions. Despite the conservative assertion that the mass media are run by liberals and radicals, an objective analysis would reveal that political commentary in the US is dominated by rightists and centrists, not liberals—and there are no radicals to be found. Citizens are not exposed to the political analyses of dissenters such as Noam Chomsky, bell hooks, Michael Parenti, or Howard Zinn. Thus the debate on crucial issues remains between the Republican right and the Democratic center—both of which share similar premises about poverty, welfare, power, and wealth. Newt Gingrich will be meeting monthly with some twenty radio talk-show hosts in order to develop an alternative to the "elite" media—the major newspapers and television networks. Actually, the charge of elite control of the media is true, as Michael Parenti and Ben Bagdikian have documented in carefully researched books on the structure of the national media. Most citizens have no genuine alternative available, and dissenting sources like *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *In These Times*, *Tikkun*, and *Zeta*, which challenge the dominant media, reach relatively few.

Singling out the Republican right for its mean-spirited attacks on the poor and its other reactionary proposals ignores the role that the Democrats play in furthering such policies by their active collaboration and failure to pose genuine alternatives. According to an article in *Zeta* magazine, Democrats are in a bind because "they [can't] propose anything contrary to the interests of corporate capital." Restrained by their own premises and practices, they cannot "counter demagogic candidates to their right, a fact right-wingers effectively exploit."

see 1994 Elections, page 14

Letters to the Editor

continued from page 2

Bloom's *crise de conscience*?

To the Editor:

The furor over Harold Bloom's attempt to define, for himself and as a gesture to other readers, the core of the Western Canon from Dante to the present, rises in part at least from Bloom's bad-tempered reaction to feminist, Marxist, new historicist, and other contemporary schools of literary criticism.

Part of the power of Bloom's reading is that it is in fact deeply personal, and full of contradictions. I am not inclined, when I read his work, to go to those contradictions as seams into which to insert the crowbar of deconstructive intelligence, but instead to accept them as genuine complexities in his thinking. So if Bloom insists that he wants only to speak and be heard as an individual reader, and yet he clearly also wants to declare the Western Canon for posterity, those desires can coexist. Again, if he insists that he abhors all non-aesthetic grounds for literary judgement, and struggles to avoid them, we can believe him at the same time as noticing that at the center of his life's work there seems to be

a skeptical humanism (the ground of which is rejection of all pious Christianizers, and a correlative admiration for those who face mortality and limitation without false consolations) which I at least find compelling. And so also if he canonizes Freud only to damn him with faint praise, describes the anxiety of influence and displays it, tries to define Canonical greatness and in that very act lays claim to it himself. The contradictions are interesting and understanding them is part of the fun of reading Bloom.

Except, in my experience, for one. The constant undertone of resentment in a writer who lumps most of his intellectual opponents together in a "School of Resentment," and the constant petty bickering with real and imagined enemies which occupies too much of Bloom's attention in *The Western Canon*, seem to me to detract from his work rather than enrich it. When Bloom disagrees with other readers on the merits or meaning of specific texts, he is usually right or at least convincing. When those other readers are more traditional critics (such as the theological readers of Dante) he disagrees vigorously but respectfully. But when his opponents are those he calls Resenters, he gets mean-spirited, so much so that no matter how convincing his arguments on specific points, I find myself reluctant to assent.

If his manner annoys me, no doubt it is galling to Bloom's adversaries to be the target of cheap shots from so fine a reader. Richard Klein's intemperate personal attack reacts to Bloom as to a schoolyard bully: "He hit me first," an understandable response but one which adds nothing to the conversation.

I would be surprised if other readers do not find Bloom's constant haggling with feminists, Marxists, deconstructionists, and the rest an annoying distraction from the power of his critical insights. Bloom has in fact benefited from some of the intellectual tools of the schools of criticism he rejects, and he sometimes acknowledges it. But at any moment, on any pretext, he mounts the engines of total war. I am inclined to say he protests too much.

Why would a writer with so fine a sense of tact bring his most ponderous rhetorical cannons to bear on even the flimsiest of antagonists? Why does Bloom find it necessary to be so defensive? Reading Bloom's latest book, I found myself reminded of an incident that happened when Bloom was at Cornell in 1968.

It was at the time that a group of black students occupied Willard Straight Hall, after a chain of events that included the burning of a cross on the wooden front porch of a dwelling where black students lived. When word spread that a group of fraternity men were conspiring to make an armed assault on the occupied citadel, the

black students brought in guns, which led in turn to the image of gun-brandishing radicals leaving the grand old Ivy League building when the affair ended—an image which has become a kind of icon for an era, though it seriously misrepresents the event it memorializes.

Harold Bloom was visiting Cornell as a professor at the Society for the Humanities, and was teaching a graduate course reading Wallace Stevens. I was a student in that course. Bloom's brilliance as a reader invited a kind of shared intellectual excitement, and I had as a result developed with Bloom the peculiar kind of temporary intimacy that can happen between student and teacher. (Part of that excitement, incidentally, came from the quality of strangeness in Bloom's illumination of seemingly familiar texts, a quality he now sees as defining Canonical creativity.)

My impression is that Bloom was deeply shaken by the events on campus. He was clearly distressed by the occupation itself, and even more so by the imagery of armed rebellion. To his credit he did not join with the extreme reactionary faculty, one of whom showed up on campus at the peak of tension in a coon-skin cap, echoing not only the pioneer tradition of expansionist violence, but also LBJ's famous gesture when reviewing the troops in Vietnam. But neither did he play a positive role in resolving the situation, as other concerned faculty members did.

Maybe Bloom stood aloof out of diffidence, because he was not really a Cornell faculty member, but I thought he was in the grip of his own almost private moral crisis, which had little to do with the events on campus. He was, as I understood it, deeply sympathetic in a general way with the moral protest of black students, yet he was appalled at the implications he thought it might have for his profession. He could not imagine how his practice of literary criticism could accommodate the demands he imagined were being made upon it. He did not show great awareness of the volatility of the actual political moment, in which he seemed almost disinterested, but he was obsessed by what he seemed to think were its larger implications. If I am not mistaken, the overriding question for Bloom was what all this meant to the future of literary criticism, as he practiced it, and the question threw him into a kind of crisis.

The signs of this crisis were visible. He showed his distress openly, displaying a restless energy and almost angst-ridden persona. I remember he did a great deal of walking around, apparently trying to think it through. Bloom knew me to be friendly to the black students' cause, and chose to make me a foil for some of his thinking. He was not a man at home with or much interested in political complexity, and he clearly was not able to deal easily with the

ambiguities of such a moment. Yet he was almost frantic in his desire to resolve, for himself, the contradictions in which he found himself immersed. Could he, in good conscience, continue to do what he most loved to do? Or did a sense of social justice require him to throw over his life's work and embark on something very different? I think those were the questions the events of the moment raised for Bloom.

One day we met on the Arts Quad, and he approached me in great excitement. He had, he said, resolved the issue for himself. Looking beyond this time of conflict, he said, he imagined that someday one black student (only one being necessary for this fantasy to work) would come to Cornell or Yale in search of the great Western literary tradition. That student deserved the opportunity for such an education, and his life's work, he said, would be to preserve, for that student, that opportunity.

I have seldom told this story, even to close friends, because it too easily tends to parody. Bloom can come off as comical, and his fantasy as insulting and racist. But that was not my experience of the moment, and it is not my opinion now. I think Bloom's gesture of reaching beyond the chaos of the moment and imagining himself as the guardian of the Western literary tradition in order to go on doing what he loved most to do was a profound decision, both arrogant and humbling, and I thought then, and think now, that his career as a reader took new energy from that decision. It is impossible to imagine him making any other decision, once the issue was set for him in the terms in which he set it; and judged in the context of the conflict which gave rise to it, it was a strange and even misdirected response. No such grand commitment was necessary for Bloom to read and write as he had always done, but he evidently thought it was necessary. If it was an arbitrary and Quixotic reaction, we now know how much Bloom admires Don Quixote after all.

Bloom has behaved since then as a man obsessed, a man with a great life's work to do, and *The Western Canon*, far from being an aberration, is the logical extension of that work, resentment and all. Perhaps it makes sense to imagine that Bloom really did rededicate himself to his life's work in a fundamentally defensive gesture, and that everything he has done since has taken some of its *raison d'être* from that reactionary moment. A dedication born in the rejection of a deeply felt moral guilt might be especially forceful in rejecting new waves of guilt, and might be especially angered by signs of resentment. For me, at least, to think so humanizes Bloom's most extreme posturing and reduces my own defensiveness toward his provocations.

—Gary Esolen
New Orleans

Writers & Artists!

The BOOKPRESS

invites you

to send in
submissions of
your work.

We are interested in
previously unpublished
reviews, interviews, essays,
and original graphic art.

Inquiries should be addressed
to: Ben Goodman, Managing Editor,
The Bookpress, 215 N. Cayuga St.,
Ithaca, New York 14850

or call

(607) 277-2254

Give The BOOKPRESS To a Friend

If you enjoy the stimulating collection of reviews, interviews, and essays that *The Bookpress* brings to you eight times a year, then why not make a gift of *The Bookpress* to a friend out of town, or to ones who are leaving town?

For only \$12, the next eight issues will be delivered directly to their door.

A perfect gift for those who love reading, thinking, and good discussion.

Please send a gift subscription of *The Bookpress* to the following addresses. Enclosed is \$12 for each subscription (Visa / MC / Discover, check, or money order accepted.)

Name: _____
Address: _____

Phone: _____

Name: _____
Address: _____

Phone: _____

Please make checks payable to *The Bookpress*,
DeWitt Building, 215 N. Cayuga St., Ithaca, NY 14850

Friends of the Bookpress

| | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| M. H. Abrams | George Gibian | David Macklin |
| Diane Ackerman | Jody Gladding | Scott McMillin |
| Martin & Leslie Bernal | Jerry Gross | Myra Malkin |
| Jonathan Bishop | Marj Haydon | Edward Murray |
| E. Wayles Browne | Neil & Louise Hertz | Margaret Nash |
| Patti & Jules Burgevin | Eva & Roald Hoffmann | Benjamin Nichols |
| R. F. Cisne | Phyllis Janowitz | Nancy & Andrew Ramage |
| Maria & Gerald Coles | George & Audrey Kahin | Mary Ann Rishel |
| William Cross | Alfred Kahn | Carl Sagan |
| Jonathan Culler | Peter Katzenstein | Nick Salvatore |
| Ruth Darling | Isaac Kramnick | Jane Parry Sleeper |
| Robert J. Doherty | Eva Kufner-Augsberger | Cushing Strout |
| Dora Donovan | Sandra and Walter Lafeber | Ann Sullivan |
| Ann Druyan | R. Carolyn Lange | Deborah Tall |
| Joyce Elbrecht | Deborah Lemon | Ree Thayer |
| Kenneth Evett | Laura M. Linke | Alison Van Dyke |
| Lydia Fakundiny | Alison Lurie | Gail & Zellman Warhaft |
| LeMoyne Farrell | Dan McCall | Paul West |
| Bryna and Harvey Fireside | James McConkey | Winthrop Wetherbee |
| Sheldon Flory | Maureen McCoy | Marian White |
| Mrs. William D. Fowler | Terry McKiernan | Carol Ann Wilburn |

Burke Revisited

Martin Luster

The shift to the right in last November's elections reflected an increasing distrust of politicians and professional lobbyists, thereby highlighting one of the core questions concerning the nature of our representative government. That is, are elected officials "delegates" who reflect in their voting the wishes of the majority of their constituents, or, in the term of the 18th-century British parliamentarian Edmund Burke, are they "trustees" who should be free to exercise independent judgment?

A representative of the district of Bristol, Burke ran into a political bees' nest when he acted in opposition to the clear feelings of his constituents in taking some pro-Catholic positions and in other matters as well. After being called on the carpet by local leaders, Burke defended his apparent disregard of the electorate in his "Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol" (1777), wherein he described himself as a "trustee" for the benefit of the entire nation. As a trustee, Burke claimed to be free to exercise his independent judgment on all public matters.

Those who were appalled at Burke's temerity reminded him that he was their "delegate" whose job it was to reflect their collective view on each issue. Further, they said, the democratic goal of majority rule depended upon strict adherence to the accurate reflection of the views of the electorate. To stray from this, they claimed, was to weaken the underlying premise of democracy.

The debate over this issue is productive and interesting regardless of the validity of the initial premise—i.e., that there has been a clear directive by the electorate to their representatives to move to the political right regarding everything from lower taxes to welfare reform to "smaller government" to deregulation, and regardless of whether such direction represents a thoughtful and informed analysis of the issues by the voting public, or whether the totals accurately represent the views of those who did not vote.

It is far from clear that these assumptions are valid. For example, "conservative" George Pataki beat "liberal" Mario Cuomo by only 48.6 percent to Cuomo's 45.4 percent—hardly a sweeping mandate for dismantling New York's government. Similarly, a recent *New York Times* poll found that although the "Contract with America" is given much credit for the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives, 72 percent of those who voted said they had not read or heard anything about the contract before they voted. And although 81 percent of the electorate said they favored an amendment to the Constitution to require a balanced federal budget by the year 2002 (a major element of the "Contract"), support dropped to 41 percent when this would require the public to pay more in federal income taxes. Support for the amendment tumbled to 30 percent if enforcement would require cuts in Social Security, to 27 percent if it would require cuts in Medicare, and just 22 percent approved if it would require cuts in education spending.

But the question persists: what does an electoral shift such as that which is perceived to have occurred on November 8th mean to elected representatives? The answer will partly depend on whether the representatives agree with the "new direction" or oppose it, on whether they are new to the legislative body or have been re-elected, and on their particular relationship with their constituency. For example, how do I, a "moderately liberal" legislator, react to this apparent conservative tide?

In my six years in the New York State Assembly, I have supported state funding for day care, housing, and nutrition programs, and a wide range of human ser-



Dede Hatch

Assemblyman Martin Luster

vices. I have opposed the death penalty and a constitutional amendment banning flag-burning. Although I have opposed state budgetary gimmicks and quick fixes (such as back-door borrowing through the door of state agencies), and have been active in the effort to make life easier for small businesses, my underlying belief that government has an important and positive role to play in our lives has identified me as a liberal. Although I received 57 percent of the vote in the last election, Mario Cuomo, who held similar positions to mine on many issues, lost not only statewide but also in some of his strongholds, such as Tompkins County. In some areas within my district he lost by a margin of almost 4 to 1. In the face of such a strong statement by voters, dare I maintain that I am the "trustee" of the people who elected me, free to exercise my judgment in accordance with my principles or should I strive more diligently to be a "delegate," reflecting as carefully as possible the wishes of my constituents?

The answer to these questions might depend on whether I am a newcomer or have been re-elected. Perhaps the newly-elected official ran as a clean slate on which the voters justifiably felt that they could write their message. As an incumbent, on the other hand, I have established a record upon which future actions and positions can fairly reliably be forecast. With the re-election mandate under my belt, I might more easily say, "you knew what you were getting," and feel freer to be a trustee.

Regardless of the status of the representative, newly-elected or re-elected, there are problems with a strict rule that attempts to define either approach on an exclusive basis. If the representatives are just delegates mirroring the views of the voters, how do they discern the majority sentiment in any given case? Do they engage in scientific polling, informal polling, tabulate the volume of letters or phone calls, or in other ways get a "sense" of what their constituents seek?

The most reliable way of knowing how one's constituents feel about a particular issue is through a well-drafted poll. While the volume of letters and calls to my office might accurately reflect the public feeling for or against an issue, that is certainly not always the case. Last January, for instance, when a bill that would have required the owners of "assault weapons" to license those guns came before the Assembly, I was deluged with about 250 phone calls and letters from constituents urging me to vote against that bill. Perhaps a dozen constituents contacted me to urge my support of the bill. The campaign of opposition was clearly orchestrated, and I was reasonably sure, because of numerous national and statewide polls indicating strong sup-

port for some restrictions on such weapons, and through hundreds of conversations with constituents, that the opposition did not accurately reflect the overall views of my constituency.

Had I wanted to be completely sure of the proportion of my constituents who were for or against that particular bill I would have had to commission a poll, an expensive undertaking (a good one costing anywhere between \$4,000 and \$12,000 depending on length and complexity). While a government official might occasionally make that expenditure, it is impossible to get an accurate gauge of his or her constituents' feelings on all the proposals that arise each year. We have all seen the polls in some legislators' newsletters that are rigged with slanted questions and limited answers to elicit the response the legislator already favors. Those are clearly a waste in terms of getting a true sense of constituent views.

However legislators gauge the views of the majority, the question still remains about what they do with that information. What if the legislator finds that a significant portion of expressed opinion is based on erroneous facts or limited understanding, or is the result of bigotry or emotions inflamed by recent events? Are those factors to be disregarded? Should the principle of "doing what the people sent me here to do" displace all other principles? If we get to the point where everyone has a "yes" and "no" button on their television or computer and can tune into the legislature and cast their vote on a bill, can we then eliminate the need to elect people to represent us? Would this kind of direct democracy be feasible or desirable?

The case for a 100 percent trusteeship approach is not much more inviting. Trust-me-I'll-take-care-of-it legislators eliminate the role of the citizen in the social contract and limit debate on important issues. At the extreme, their chosen sources of information become the real power, giving rise to government by professional lobbyists and special interests. The quality of government becomes solely dependent on the intellectual capacity of the representatives and those they choose to seek for advice. Their activity is focused at the capital since there is no need to stay in touch at home.

If the role of an elected legislator is usually left undefined and unarticulated by the elected official, it is also less than precisely defined in the mind of the average citizen. Ask people who oppose the death penalty what they think of representatives who, in clear disregard of the wishes of most of the electorate, consistently vote against that measure and you will hear the words "courageous," "principled," and "leader." But when their wishes for a tax cut are supported by a majority of the constituency, those same people will tell those same representatives that their duty is to do the will of their constituents even if the legislators' reasoned and sound conclusion is to the contrary. My own experience convinces me that voters will elect and return to office legislators with whom they sometimes differ on major issues if they are convinced that the officeholders have thoroughly examined the issue, have made a case for their positions, and have stood by those positions as a matter of principle.

In my case, I have long opposed the reinstatement of the death penalty in New York, both as a matter of conscience and for practical reasons as well, and have vigorously fought against this measure since my first election in 1988. I assume that something over 50 percent of my constituents disagree with me on this issue. I have made it a practice of explaining in detail the reasons for my position, sending out a great deal of material to those who disagree with me in an effort to change their minds. Although I have probably been able to change a few positions, more importantly,

the people with whom I correspond have appreciated the effort I have made to engage them in a meaningful way in the discussion of this important issue. Overall, I don't believe my position has hurt me electorally because of the dialogue in which I have engaged.

More than anything, I believe the voters want to know that their representatives are intelligently examining the issues. During the 1994 campaign, my opponent criticized my vote against a bill that would have required hospitals to inform mothers of newborn children of the results of HIV screening on the blood of the child. When presented with this issue in 1993, my first reaction was the same as that of my opponent. I was outraged that the law did not require such disclosure and began to lobby my colleagues for passage of that bill. But as time went on, and I had the opportunity to consult with physicians, other health care providers, and public health officials, it became clear to me that such a bill would not produce the results intended. In fact, I was convinced that a bill mandating disclosure of HIV tests would drive many of the mothers (and, by extension, their children) who are advised of positive results out of the health care system. What I learned is that the mothers would seek help from an institution with which they were unfamiliar if they were empowered to make decisions about their medical care; if they were not empowered, they would leave the system. After months of study and examination, I helped to draft a bill that required prenatal counseling of expectant mothers in at-risk populations, while still keeping the disclosure of results voluntary. This bill was ultimately preferred by the overwhelming majority of health care professionals and was passed in the Assembly.

My own experience tells me that my role as an elected representative is neither solely one of trustee or delegate, but certainly requires me to engage my constituents in meaningful debate. Where the call is not clear to me, I am more likely to attempt to reflect what seems to be the prevailing public opinion, and where that opinion is very strong and conscience permits, I will accommodate that opinion. But, because the issues before the legislature are sometimes quite complex and require lengthy and careful investigation, there are occasions where I must take on the role of trustee. In that admittedly uncomfortable role, I vote according to my informed judgment. The stance of trustee carries with it an obligation to work hard to educate my constituents and so to try to bring their views more closely into alignment with mine.

It is always a risk, of course, to have perhaps a majority of your constituents think that your position is wrong. If a large percentage favor the reinstatement of the death penalty in New York, the question then becomes, "Are many of these constituents 'single-issue people' who will vote for a different candidate on this matter alone?" After four incumbencies it seems clear that although many favor the death penalty, it is not the principle issue. What is most critical is our agreement on the basic premise that people have a right to be protected from certain heinous criminals. I understand and sympathize with the frustration over violent crime and the laxness of our laws and have responded with strong support for life-without-parole legislation. My responsibility is to continue to show respect for those whom I represent, whether or not they voted for me, whether or not they agree with me, by listening to their concerns, by explaining my position, and by acting on their behalf in as responsive a manner as possible.

Martin Luster represents the 125th District in the New York State Assembly. He won re-election in November 1994 and is now serving his fourth term.

A Sudden Fear of Strangers

Harvey Fireside

The "tired and huddled masses" to whom the Statue of Liberty has addressed the welcoming words of Emma Lazarus are now being told to "go back where you came from." The landslide support for California's Proposition 187 seems certain to foster in other states, and eventually at the national level, measures denying government benefits not only to illegal aliens but to all non-citizens. Though the cutoff of benefits flies in the face of the due process and equal protection clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment, one wonders whether the courts will permanently halt this xenophobe steamroller.

We have watched extreme nationalists in Europe turn ugly against refugees from the East and felt secure that we would never see such rabble-rousing here. But the public response in the US has exceeded the half-measures of our Western allies: militarization of the 2000-mile US-Mexican border, denial of schooling and health benefits to children who lack proof of citizenship, punitive measures against employers of undocumented immigrants, and a speedup of the deportation process.

Are we, like the Europeans, simply reacting to economic stagnation by enacting sanctions against newcomers—our traditional source of unskilled labor? The emotional excesses of the nativists indicate that the current wave of hostility is something more than a logical response to hard times. Aliens have become a symbol of our national fears and insecurities; they have become the Other who threatens our sense of normalcy. It is no accident that the current anti-refugee hysteria comes after some forty years of Cold War. As a substitute for the Communists who were seen as undermining

our "way of life," we have created the barbarians at the gates who create a drain on our economy and bring with them drugs, crime, disease, and assorted other plagues.

A recent report by Michael Fix and Jeffrey Passel, "Immigration and Immigrants: Setting the Record Straight" (The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C., 1994), puts the lie to such claims, based on the authors' analysis of data from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the 1990 census. For example, while we are indeed seeing record numbers of refugees in the 1990s, immigrants during the 1890s represented a far greater proportion of the total population. Further, some 60 percent of the present "illegals" are not border crossers but tourists and students who have overstayed their visas.

According to *Business Week*, immigrants earn \$240 billion a year, pay \$90 billion in taxes, and receive only \$5 billion in welfare. Young refugees have lower rates for welfare than do citizens, while older ones have slightly higher rates (due to their lack of English language skills and their ineligibility for Social Security)—making the overall rates of citizens and immigrants on the rolls virtually the same. My own research in the Southwest revealed that crime rates of immigrants were generally low, since they wanted to avoid trouble from the authorities; further, that their illnesses were predominantly not infectious but the result of malnutrition.

Instead of the prevalent image of the refugee crook or welfare cheat, what we find throughout the borderlands and in our cities and fields are immigrants who are willing to tackle jobs the rest of us disdain. As some embarrassed national figures like Michael Huffington have had to concede, many Americans, especially on the West Coast, rely on foreigners to mind their children, clean their homes, and do the gardening. We can also spot Hispanic workers staffing restaurant kitchens in the Southwest, raising our fruits and vegetables, and doing construction work. Fix and Passel estimate that when all the costs of immigrants in the US are totaled, they are outweighed by such benefits as the creation of jobs at businesses they found—leaving a margin of some \$25 to \$30 billion benefitting the economy. But there is widespread denial of the fact that the orange juice appeared on the breakfast table this morning thanks to Chicano migrant labor, or that such delicacies as asparagus or wine at dinner represent the sweat of poorly paid workers in the California sun. As to our other accustomed niceties, who of us has traced the Central American or Southeast Asian provenance of our athletic shoes, our shirts, our electronic gear, or our children's toys?

It's the old capitalist way: to remain competitive by lowering labor costs and expanding free trade. But an excursion to the Rio Grande valley will quickly disabuse us of the notion that exploiting aliens is a simple

economic transaction. On the Mexican side, high-tech goods are assembled at *maquiladoras* under sweatshop conditions. Heavy metal wastes are dumped into the river and end up poisoning those who draw their drinking water on both banks. Formerly rare disorders, such as acephaly—babies born without brains—are becoming more common. On the US side, we find Mexican immigrants—documented or not—in *colonias*, migrant worker settlements in areas that have the lowest per capita income in the country. Only recently has the Texas Attorney General organized a legal "strike force" to lift these workers out of peonage. Following landmark decisions in federal court, Chicano workers will eventually be able to own modest homes and to obtain water and sewage service. Until their plight was exposed, these immigrants had been terrorized and exploited by their rural slumlords.

Several visits to the sprawling US detention center known colloquially as "el Corralon" in southwest Texas have shown me the institutionalized violence of a system that jails refugees for months while they appeal their deportation orders. It takes legal aid staffers from Harlingen over an hour to drive across country roads to the Port Isabel Service Processing Center of the INS, while their clients, dressed in orange prison uniforms, suffer 100-degree days filled with boredom, or worse. It is common knowledge that reports of sexual or physical abuse by guards are routinely ignored. Those prisoners able to secure jobs in the kitchen or hauling garbage at a dollar an hour are considered fortunate.

In El Paso you can watch the Border Patrol toy with refugees trying to cross the shallow river by freezing them in the glare of their searchlights. Human rights groups here and in Southern California have compiled reports of incidents in which Patrol agents fire needlessly, often fatally, at fleeing refugees. In the fields on the southern approaches to San Diego, teenage vigilantes use the running forms of Mexicans for target practice. The violence is endemic, ranging from the denial of health care to immigrant children to the prohibition of legal employment for their parents.

There are a few courageous souls—often nuns and other religious workers—who still provide food and shelter for refugees along the border. Indeed, Ithacans for the past seven years have contributed to the maintenance of such shelters through the Border Fund. But for many on the US side of the border the sight of the powerless does not evoke empathy but aggression.

Our political leaders have been preaching the gospel of private selfishness instead of the common good. Proposition 187 sponsors, including Governor Pete Wilson, conveniently forget the time when they welcomed immigrants into California to fill jobs that went begging. Nor do they recall an

even earlier era, during World War II, when the "bracero" program recruited Mexican workers as replacements for young men who had gone into the army. The determined hunt for aliens by the Border Patrol began only in the postwar period, and it has gone through increasingly vicious cycles since that time.

The current xenophobia comes in the wake of California's cutbacks in the defense and computer industries. It also coincides with the growing political awareness of Chicano workers and their belated entry into the electoral arena as the Hispanic share of the population grows nationwide, especially in California, Texas, Florida, Arizona, Illinois, New Jersey, and New York. When this group tries to claim its proportion of electoral offices, the Anglo establishment lashes out. The seven states with 85 percent of our immigrants happen to comprise 70 percent of the electoral votes for the presidency. The candidates for 1996 are fully aware of that fact and some may be tempted to fuel the hatred of refugees.

No longer on the political fringe are the self-appointed guardians of WASP culture—groups that are lobbying to make English the "official language." The English-firsters deplore bilingual classes set up for recently arrived children in public schools and decry multicultural courses on US history that include the perspective of minorities. Such nativist views have been enacted into law in the states with the most immigrants. Among the more bizarre consequences have been the removal of Latin names from the cages in the Miami zoo, and the firing of a California state employee for talking Spanish on the phone to a friend during his lunch hour.

As US society becomes increasingly heterogeneous, it seems paradoxical to legislate cultural uniformity. We are, after all, a nation of immigrants. Unless we are Native Americans, we all have ancestors who came ashore to seek political refuge and economic opportunity. They may have even encountered the same prejudices and discrimination as those directed at today's refugees—told that they would have to be content with menial jobs and crowded tenements. Their grandchildren sit in my classes today, but they argue that "then" there was opportunity, while now the country is too crowded. I tell them about my own experience as a refugee from Hitler's Vienna in 1940, when I caught my first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty. That memory makes me especially sensitive to the current anti-immigrant politics. It induces me to contradict my students in their belief that the stranger is a threat to their future, rather than a challenge to make us share with him for our mutual benefit as human beings.

Harvey Fireside teaches politics at Ithaca College, and is co-author of the book Brown v. Board of Education: Equal Schooling for All.

Think Spring!

Need new solutions to old property problems?

Hope to reduce yard and garden maintenance?

Now is the time to plan!

Call



ALTERNATIVE PRESS AND
HARD TO FIND INFORMATION

Durland
Alternatives
Library

Book Sale! Feb. 19-26

A UNIQUE Collection of Over 6,000
books, 600 Audio Tapes, 150
Videos, and 300 periodicals

Anabel Taylor Hall * CORNELL UNIVERSITY
(607) 255-6486

MON-FRI 9:30 - 6:00 PM * WED 9:30 - 9:00 PM
SAT 12:00 - 4:00 PM * SUN 7:30 - 10:30 PM

Free and Open to All...
A Project of CRESA

by
Sam Shepard

February 16-19 and 22-25 at 8 p.m.
February 19 and 25 at 2 p.m.
Flexible Theatre

Tickets: \$6 and \$8
Ticket Center: 254-ARTS

Department of Theatre Arts
Center for Theatre Arts
430 College Avenue

CORNELL UNIVERSITY



Maillol, Miró, Chagall, Shahn,
Henry Moore, and others

SOLA'ART GALLERY

Dewitt Mall
Ithaca, NY 14850
Tel: 607 272-6552

Mon.-Sat. 10:30-5:30 Sun. 12-3

The Geography of Nowhere

ROISSY EXPRESS: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE PARIS SUBURBS
François Maspéro
Verso, 270 pages, \$18.95 paper

Andrew McCann

On August 17, 1783, an emblematic moment in the drama of modernization was played out at Gonesse, not far from what is now Roissy, the site of Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport. As François Maspéro relates, "terror-stricken inhabitants sketched with forks and pumped with buckshot into a frightful monster which, after being sprinkled with holy water and exorcisms by the priests, expired with a diabolical hissing noise, spreading noxious vapours." Soon after, an official "warning to the people" announced the advent of the hydrogen balloon: "A discovery has been made which the government has seen fit to make public in order to warn of the terror that it might occasion among the people. By calculating the difference in weight between air that is *inflammable* and the air of our atmosphere, it has been found that a balloon filled with this inflammable air will rise towards the heavens."

In 1841, Heinrich Heine noted that modernized systems of transportation in particular would radically alter the dimensions in which humans live and interact: "Space is killed by the railways, and we are left with time alone." As the planet shrinks under the proliferation of technologies devoted to motion, what is uniquely modern about our daily experience is not embodied in discrete locations and habitations as much as in our unprecedented ability to move through these, reducing geography to an experience that is abstract and

temporal: 6 hours from New York to Paris. In 1783, the inhabitants of Gonesse could scarcely have guessed what transformation the monster floating above them portended—a transformation of the very space they stood in, which would finally reduce the suburban geography to "a wasteland" and "a land of wasting souls": "a shapeless muddle, a desert containing ten million inhabitants, a series of indistinct grey buildings: a circular purgatory, with Paris as the paradise in the middle."

This effacement and marginalization of the Paris suburbs motivates Maspéro's third-person retelling of a train journey he completed in 1989 from Roissy-Charles de Gaulle to Saint Rémy les Chevreuse, travelling through thirty-eight suburb stops that, for most commuters, wane into the empty time separating them from the cultural attractions or workday responsibilities of central Paris. Maspéro, accompanied by Anaïk Frantz, whose photographic work illustrates the text, traveled at about the rate of a station a day, disembarking, searching the neighborhood for accommodation, and then devoting himself to the haphazard exploration of the housing estates and factory suburbs inhabited by immigrants from France's former colonies. This terrain, Maspéro notes, has been reduced to a series of disconnected points linked only by motorways and railways, such that space itself is "broken into bits." Maspéro's mission in *Roissy Express* is to discover the demography and geography that seems to have vanished. Accordingly, he embarks on a journey across a twilight zone not of uncharted but unimaginable space in which there is "nothing to see." Not yielding to what he refers to as the

see *Geography of Nowhere*, page 14



(reprinted from *Ecce Homo*, Jack Brussel Publishers, 1965)

Friedrichstrasse, by George Grosz, 1918

Making the Best of It

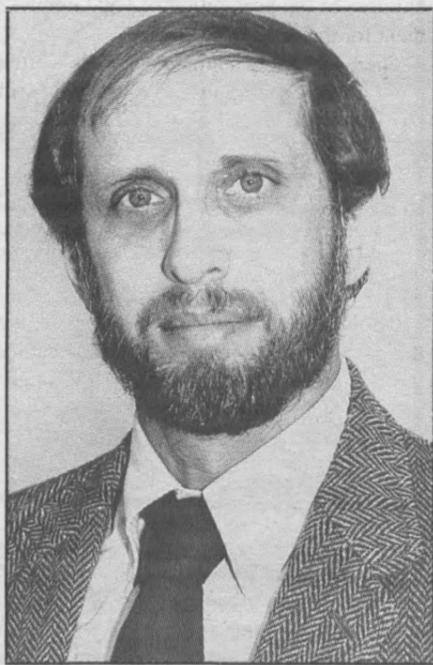
SNOWSHOEING THROUGH SEWERS: ADVENTURES IN NEW YORK CITY, NEW JERSEY AND PHILADELPHIA
Michael Rockland
Rutgers University Press
220 pages, \$21.95

Edward Hower

Most travel books report on exotic, far-away places and make our own neighborhoods look rather ordinary by comparison. Michael Rockland's new book of travel essays takes a different approach. The author, a professor of American Studies at Rutgers, explores familiar terrains but finds unusual ways to experience them. The tales he brings back from his adventures make the ordinary seem fascinating.

The book's only problem is its poetically misleading title, "Snowshoeing through Sewers." The author never puts on snowshoes or goes near a sewer. His turf is above ground—the densely populated New York-New Jersey-Philadelphia corridor where he lives. To get a fresh perspective on the area, he traverses it in a canoe, on a bicycle, and by foot. "These are often scenes of horror," he says, "but they may also have a peculiar beauty. At night, with the lights and flaring gas of the refineries at their brightest, the industrial badlands of New Jersey are as beautiful in their way as the eroded badlands of South Dakota."

Despite a friend's warning that his aluminum canoe might dissolve in polluted waters, Rockland sets out to explore the streams that lead from his New Jersey home to New York, and to paddle the waterways surrounding Manhattan island. Why? Rockland readily admits that his desire "to be the hero of my own life" has been inspired more by the mid-life restlessness of a man with a



Rutgers University Press

Michael Rockland

mortgage and a family than by any kind of ecological idealism.

He's no high-tech adventurer; he forgets to bring tide charts, and wears no fancy gear, just blue jeans and an old windbreaker. On his voyage, huge tankers nearly swamp his canoe. Police in a patrol boat yell at him to put his life preserver on, making him feel foolish. Friendly people on a powerboat give him a tow through the harbor, then nearly kill him when they toss him a high-velocity can of beer.

He camps one night on the Arthur Kill landfill on Staten Island, forty stories high and several miles long. A compulsive collector of off-beat facts, he reports that Arthur Kill and the Great Wall of China are

the only man-made structures on earth that show up on photographs of the planet taken from satellites.

On Ellis Island (before its restoration was completed) he sleeps out in a field where his immigrant ancestors, just arrived from Europe, once played soccer while they waited to be processed. The place is deserted but for its ghosts, and he delights in the ruined printing press, the rusted iron beds, the owl that nests in the chapel where "plaster hung down in festoons and mildewed hymnals littered the scratched wooden floor."

On a bike and boat trip through New Jersey, he traces the routes of the abandoned canals, or "liquid highways," that once connected the state's towns. Some canals, he finds, have reverted to streams where old shopping carts wallow in the mud, but others have been landscaped into pretty parks where families picnic and fish. That nature is no longer "unspoiled" doesn't bother him. "It was the sudden meeting of man's works and nature," he says, "whether in the wilderness or the city, that...excited me." A scavenger in old guide books, Rockland digs up information about now-derelict factories, place names of towns, forgotten heroes commemorated by overgrown suburban statues—details that link the terrain to the nation's history.

No matter how familiar, landscape is not space to move across in order to reach a destination, but a place to experience in its own right, hopefully to enjoy, but always to value for whatever it reveals. As Rockland hikes the length of Manhattan, this perspective makes the city seem almost like virgin territory. He describes the contours of the tall buildings with the sort of wonder that people in the last century felt about the sheer physical might of America. He notes with sadness a boy's grief when a rooster, which has inex-

plicably appeared on 125th Street, gets hit by a taxi. When he hurts his knee in a fall, a black man rushes up to him, scaring him, but the man only wants to offer him a band-aid for his knee, and Rockland has to confront the racism in him that caused his fright.

Reaching Battery Park at the bottom of Manhattan, he is rewarded with a view of the kind of urban beauty he loves.

An ocean liner moved silently out to sea. The Statue of Liberty looked as if it envied the ship its mobility and would soon stride after it—even if that meant sinking massively beneath the waves. The lights were coming on in New Jersey. The view was...especially gratifying since I had walked so far to see it. It was like standing on the edge of the world.

Not everything Rockland finds delights him. A graffiti announcing GOD LIED TO ME seems a suitable epigraph for the ravaged, eerie moonscape he encounters as he treks past Philadelphia's airport and industrial wastelands. He's discouraged when, pedaling through highway smog on Route 1, a carload of kids yells, "Get off the highway, dork!"

But the spirit of adventure quickly revives him when some unexpected vista or a conversation with a native brings him fresh insights. Michael Rockland's essays are thoughtful, original, and amusing, written in a breezy, conversational style that often achieves its own kind of eloquence. He has succeeded in his intention to write a book that can serve as "a love letter to my much abused land."

Edward Hower's third novel, *Night Train Blues*, will be published next year. He currently teaches in the Writing Program at Ithaca College.

FOR WHOM THE BELL CURVES

THE BELL CURVE: INTELLIGENCE AND CLASS STRUCTURE IN AMERICAN LIFE
Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray
The Free Press, 845 pages, \$30

Gerald S. Coles

Throughout this century, arguments have recurred periodically that the US is stratified according to intelligence, that intelligence is largely genetically determined, and that blacks are the least intelligent race. Unfortunately, no matter how thoroughly refuted, such notions reappear disguised as "new" theories, with more "scientific" confirming evidence. *The Bell Curve*, containing the most recent of these arguments, is represented as a fearless, fresh look at the truth about intelligence and the "taboo fact that intelligence levels differ among ethnic groups." But it is the same old pseudo-scientific fabrication of supposedly value-free, empirical analysis. *The Bell Curve's* classist and racist apology for power, wealth, and the status quo dovetails quite nicely with the current dominant political agenda based on blaming the poor and blacks for the country's ills. As such, the inordinate media attention and credibility given the book is not surprising.

What makes reviewing *The Bell Curve* difficult is the sheer number of arguments in it that must be criticized. A general appraisal runs the risk of dealing inadequately with the book's multitude of deficiencies and pñata of "facts" that shower the reader (some previous reviewers who attempted such an appraisal were accused of not having actually read the book). The opposite urge, to do sufficient justice to *The Bell Curve* with a review that equals its length, is of course impossible.

To avoid this dilemma, I have chosen to concentrate on Head Start and similar preschool programs for poor children that have, for the last quarter-century, been a focal point of attack for the book's antecedents. In its turn, *The Bell Curve* points to the supposed failure of these programs as evidence for the heredity-driven Great Divide between the "cognitive elite" and "the rest of society," and for wanting to stop the waste of money that bleeding hearts vainly spend trying to improve the cognitive development of these children. I believe that an examination of the methodology behind the authors' analysis of Head Start will offer a homunculus revealing the abominable features of the larger creature.

The Bell Curve on Head Start

Murray and Herrnstein hark back to University of California psychologist Arthur Jensen's claim in 1969 that "Compensatory education has been tried and it apparently has failed." Jensen went on to attack Head Start, arguing that blacks were congenitally dumber than whites by 15 points on IQ tests. For their part, Murray and Herrnstein describe Head Start as a well-meaning failure "intended to break the cycle of poverty by targeting preschool children in poor families." Initially, they concede, the program seemed to produce impressive IQ gains—as much as ten points—but soon, Murray and Herrnstein lament, despite spending "billions on hundreds of thousands of children and their families," evidence of "dreaded fade-out" began to appear:

To shorten a long story, every serious attempt to assess the impact of Head Start on intelligence has found fade-out. Cognitive benefits that can often be picked up in the first grade of school are usually gone by the third grade. By sixth grade, they have vanished in aggregate statistics.

The authors concede that Head Start may have value in its family counseling and public health benefits, but they insist that "no

lasting improvements in intelligence have ever been statistically validated with any Head Start program." One response to this disappointment has been to redefine its goals. "Instead of raising intelligence, contemporary advocates say it reduces long-term school failure, crime," and so forth, benefits called "sleeping effects." But even here, say Murray and Herrnstein,

these claims do not survive scrutiny. The evidence for sleeper effects, such as it is, almost never comes from Head Start programs themselves but from more intensive and expensive programs.

So much for Head Start. As for the "more intensive and expensive programs," these only demonstrate the futility of throwing good money after bad. Take the Perry Preschool Program in Ypsilanti, Michigan. After one or two years, children in this program were "scoring eleven points higher in IQ than the control group. But by the end of fourth grade, no significant difference in IQ remained. Fadeout again," Murray and Herrnstein sigh. They do add that

the Ypsilanti group believes it has found [my emphasis] evidence for a higher likelihood of high school graduation and some post-high school education, higher employment rates and literacy scores, lower arrest rates and fewer years spent in special education classes as a result of the year or two in preschool.

But, we are counseled, these beliefs are an empirical and monetary illusion:

The effects are small and some of them fall short of statistical significance. They hardly justify investing billions of dollars in run-of-the-mill Head Start programs.

Another preschool program Murray and Herrnstein discuss is the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina, which begins its service with children just over a month old. Murray and Herrnstein report "unequivocal good news"—at least at first glance: at the end of the fifth year, children in the program outscored non-participants by half a standard deviation on an intelligence test. By age 12, the children "were still doing better intellectually than the controls." Twenty-eight percent of the experimental children had repeated a grade, compared to 55 percent of the control children.

Undaunted by such evidence, the authors wring their hands over the validity of the experimental method. For example, the experimental children "outscored the controls on cognitive performance tests by at least as large a margin by the age of 1 or 2 years, and perhaps even by 6 months, as they had after nearly five years of intensive day care." This might mean that the "intervention had achieved all its effects in the first months of the first year of the project." Straining to defend their denial of the lasting effects of early reinforcement, Murray and Herrnstein question whether the groups were "different to begin with," and they conclude, without any evidence that the study was faulty, that the debate over the Abecedarian results remains "unresolved."

The third preschool program reviewed in *The Bell Curve* is the Milwaukee Project, aimed at "healthy babies of poor black mothers with IQs below 75." Children in the program scored about ten points higher in IQ than the controls by the age of 12 to 14 years, but "this increase was not accompanied by increases in school performance compared to the control group." Both groups were behind their peers in reading and math. Based on these findings, Murray and Herrnstein remind us, previous critics concluded that the "program's substantial and enduring gain in IQ has been produced by coaching the children so well on taking intelligence tests that their scores no longer measure

intelligence or g (the symbol for general intelligence) very well."

The claim that children in the Milwaukee Project were coached, first raised by Arthur Jensen, was answered by the Project's researchers long before *The Bell Curve* was published. However, Murray and Herrnstein fail to mention the researchers' 1989 paper

For example, the Perry Preschool Program participants outscored the control youngsters on achievement tests at age 14 and had higher literacy scores. By age 19, the preschool graduates were almost twice as likely to be employed or in college or vocational training than were control youngsters.

In the Milwaukee Project, Murray and

general intellectual ability. Since the "environment is an unimaginably complex melange of influences and inputs," they argue that social policy would be better directed at gaining "insights into the physiological basis of intelligence rather than from the cultural or educational variables that have been customary in educational

damental function of rescuing small children from unstable, joyless, and dangerous environments." These recommendations are, tidily, both heartrending and financially prudent because "the nation" can't afford to spend the money (not the rich or corporate America or the Pentagon, but "the nation"—all of us, in it together). Moreover, even if "the nation" wanted to spend the money, there's not enough of the cognitive elite to go around:

The nation cannot conceivably implement a Milwaukee Project or Abecedarian Project for all disadvantaged children. It is not just the dollar costs that put such ambitions out of reach (though they do) but the impossibility of staffing them. With teacher-to-child ratios ranging as high as one to three and staff-to-child ratios even higher, these programs come close to calling for a trained person per eligible child.

In contrast to Murray and Herrnstein, those who support expanding Head Start have argued that key aspects of exemplary programs for promoting cognitive growth are known and documented, and that their success can be duplicated. Lawrence J. Schweinhart and David P. Weikart, co-directors of the Perry Preschool study, have outlined the salient features of a successful Head Start program. For example:

Trained, qualified early-childhood teachers create high-quality Head Start programs. Teaching staff need systematic in-service training that enables them to observe young children developing, respond appropriately, and initiate activities that fit children's developmental levels. They need training in how to help parents contribute to young children's development. Leaders in every Head Start agency must be prepared to conduct systematic training that focuses on improving the staff's teaching performance... Well-trained Head Start teachers should receive appropriate professional salaries and benefits.

Demonstrated gains do not mean that all children in Head Start and related pre-school programs reap academic and other benefits, or that these programs are in any way a sole solution for countering the effects of poverty. At best, they can be regarded as necessary but not sufficient. Edward Zigler, one of Head Start's founders, speaks of the social limitations of Head Start and cautions not "to oversell the effectiveness" of the program. Head Start is successful when children in the program are compared to similar children not enrolled. Other comparisons reveal the program's limitations. In a Montgomery County, Maryland, study, for example, poor children in Head Start fared better than their peers not enrolled in the program, but Zigler reports that

compared to their wealthier peers, the Head Start children still were disturbingly behind. Indeed, as a general finding in studies on the effects of quality preschool programs, a substantial portion of the participants still require remedial education, and/or get held back a grade or more in school. Head Start cannot by itself compensate for all the bad housing, substance abuse, violence, and lack of jobs in many communities... [I]t does not inoculate them against all the social ills threatening America's children and families.

From these comparisons one might begin to draw the "inconceivable" conclusion for solving school readiness and promoting cognition: eliminate poverty rather than try to ameliorate its consequences. However, for Murray and Herrnstein, who promote an ideology of inevitable social inequities, this alternative requires thinking the unthinkable.

Fade Out?

The claim that there is a "fade out" in pre-



(reprinted from *State and Mind*, March-April 1977) Gregg Williard

which questions what "not" teaching to the test would have meant: the children would not have been taught "to build a tower of three blocks, to copy circles, to imitate sounds made by others, how to count up to 2 or 3, the names of colors and objects, to name parts of the body, to draw a man, to understand the concepts of more, less, under, over, left, and right." In other words, "coaching" actually meant teaching the very developmental, enriching skills one expects all children to learn. Only in this way could the test scores have possibly been said to be "artificially" inflated.

More importantly, we must keep in mind that the decisive cognitive issue for poor children and their families—as for all children and families—is not how they perform on an IQ test, but how their cognitive abilities develop during the early school years with respect to matters such as literacy. Here there is no question that quality Head Start and related preschool programs have promoted cognitive growth.

Herrnstein are technically correct in saying the children showed no "increases in school performance compared to the control group." The school-related increases they nimbly omit are those of the Metropolitan Readiness Battery given prior to entering first grade. This "readiness" test for academic learning includes mastery of beginning consonants, letter-sound correspondence, listening, school language, quantitative concepts, and qualitative operations. Here, the Project children scored dramatically above the control children (75th vs. 29th percentile). Subsequent academic progress did deteriorate when the children entered the Milwaukee schools, but this "fadeout," the researchers argued, does not negate the readiness test evidence, it simply reflects the unfavorable educational and social conditions the children subsequently encountered.

For Murray and Herrnstein, the main lesson to be learned from such programs as the Perry Preschool or Abecedarian is how difficult it is to alter the environment to increase

research." Studying the latter variables are "just the politically correct questions," whereas studying physiology moves us toward "the inner logic of the science." (Is culture "outer" logic?)

Humane, Murray and Herrnstein are willing to spend something on poor children. True, preschool programs like Head Start won't add much to children's cognitive functioning, they reason, but "such findings do not invalidate Head Start's value as a few hours' daily refuge for small children who need it." Such programs might produce "improvements in social adjustment" and in "socializing children from highly disadvantaged backgrounds." Murray and Herrnstein emphasize that they are not suggesting helping a lot of kids; theirs is a "limited endorsement" offering some help to "the small fraction of the population that is both at substantial risk for mental retardation and living in the worst conditions. Funding should be based on the extent to which the program actually serves "the laudable and more fun-

school gains after program participants enter school is both true and false. Certainly "fade out" can be found among children from Head Start and related programs overall. However, the higher quality programs demonstrate that academic measures of cognitive growth—such as literacy achievement—are sustained in a large proportion of children well into high school. Moreover, a recent reassessment of studies purporting to support the "fade out" view concluded: "there is considerable evidence that preschool programs of many types—including Head Start—have persistent effects on academic ability and success. There is no convincing evidence that these effects decline over time."

Again, this is on average. Where the early gains of Head Start participants have not been maintained, researchers have identified the cause not in the children, but in the public schools they attend. A comparison of youngsters who attended a Head Start program with those who did not attend any type of preschool or those who attended a preschool program other than Head Start found that the public schools of former Head Start participants were "unsafe places where average achievement levels are low, the educational climate is unstimulating, educational resources are limited, and relations between staff and students are not harmonious." This finding should not come as a surprise to anyone who has tried to understand "fade out" with the least bit of logic: if children bloom in condition "A" but wither in condition "B," it's reasonable to assume the withering has more to do with "B" than "A." But the "inner" logic of Murray and Herrnstein never runs that way.

Further evidence for the causes of "fade out" comes from Head Start programs that continued to serve children into the first few years of school. With extended support, researchers found, children continued to score much higher on reading tests, were more likely to graduate from high school, and were less likely to be held back a grade than children who had only attended preschool or children with no preschool experience. Thus participants in "Success for All," a long-term intervention project that continued beyond preschool, were, on average, above control children in reading and other language proficiency measures. Somehow, in *The Bell Curve's* 845 pages of research and "facts," there was no room for this information on "fade out."

Disembodied Facts

The methodology used to address the connection between cognition and Head Start reveals a central deficiency in *The Bell Curve's* analysis: all facts and empirical connections are disembodied. In a book that is supposed to be about "class structure" and "American life," each and every category in the book—poverty, welfare, social class, schooling, civility, citizenship, race—is "named" and connected empirically, but there is no meaningful elucidation of any of them. Murray and Herrnstein attempt to define them by facts and statistics, but in doing so they not only misrepresent each category, they also distort the facts, statistics, and connections to IQ.

A chief example here is Head Start, cursorily described as a program "intended to break the cycle of poverty" and raise intelligence, upon which "billions" have been spent "on hundreds of thousands of children and their families." Implied in this description is an extensive program possessing the means to achieve its goal. Among the many features omitted in this description is the political context in which Head Start has functioned and the conditions of poverty it has had to combat. I will attempt to fill in some of the blanks.

Despite evidence that pre-school programs for poor children can be beneficial, Head Start has always been underfunded.

From the beginning of the program, observes Zigler, "the amount budgeted per child was still too little to allow for a quality educational program." By 1980, Zigler was

especially concerned about the cutbacks in staff, hours, and services. Class size had increased from 15 to 20 children and the overall expenditure per child expressed in constant 1967 dollars had declined from \$835 in that year to \$813 in 1980. The average Head Start salary was \$6,280, with a large percentage at minimum wage, and low wages were contributing to increased staff turnover. The federal regional staff charged with monitoring local programs had declined by at least 25 percent since 1970, at the very time that the program needed more staff to prepare for its first significant expansion in many years.

In the early 1980s, the Reagan administration persistently tried to fold Head Start into block grants to states, which would essentially have destroyed the program. Only a great public outcry forced the administration to back down. Nonetheless, the Reagan administration did go on to dismiss all recommendations for restoring staff-child ratios and class size, and for upgrading the professional quality of staff.

In 1991, Head Start funding was raised by \$399 million, to \$1.95 billion. However, because funds for cost-of-living increases were not allocated, grantees were forced to "use funding intended for quality improvement to maintain current services." The overall result was a dilution of quality. Said one Head Start official, "A long-term disregard for the effect of inflation" resulted in an actual 13 percent decline in per-child expenditures from 1981 to 1989.

In 1992, the program was funded at \$2.2 billion, still "\$2 billion below the financing level set in the 1990 Head Start Reauthorization Act." Under Clinton, Head Start increased to approximately \$4 billion for 1995, still far short of the funds required for full, quality programming.

In addition, deeper poverty has increased the need for more intensive services. Head Start programs must respond to the effects of increased neighborhood crime, inadequate housing, poor nutrition, drugs, and child abuse with more one-to-one counseling and assistance to families and troubled children. By every measure, life has been hard and is getting harder for children in general, and African-American children in particular. This is evident in current statistics for unemployment, family income, infant mortality, contagious diseases, and all the attendant ills of increased destitution. As one Head Start worker observed, "We look back to the poverty of the early 1970s as the good old days."

Head Start has never had the financial resources to serve the society's actual needs. Since 1965, 11 million poor children have been in the program but 50 million who qualified were left out. I have no space here to compare Head Start to other federal expenditures. Suffice it to say that the amount spent on Head Start children is a relative pittance compared to the billions spent on military hardware, the savings and loan fiasco, and other subsidies to corporate interests. Head Start funds are not lacking because there are insufficient resources, but because those who hold power and make policy choose to spend them otherwise.

Of course, it never occurs to Murray and Herrnstein that the multitude of college graduates working at low-paying unskilled jobs, as well as those who have been victims of corporate leaning-and-meaning, provide a pool of educated talent who could readily be trained for well-paying jobs, thereby solving the problem of finding skilled staffing that so worries them.

The Bell Curve's methodology is full of see *For Whom the Bell Curves*, page 15

An Interview with Helena María Viramontes

Finding Home

Nancy Christoph

The author of a collection of short stories, *The Moths and Other Stories* (cited by Sandra Cisneros as one of the ten books that most influenced her life), Helena María Viramontes has just completed her first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, which will be published this spring by Dutton. She has been the recipient of several writing awards, including a National Endowment for the Arts Award in Fiction. In 1989, Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez selected Viramontes to participate in a storytelling workshop at the Sundance Institute in Utah. This spring semester, she will teach two classes at Cornell: "Introduction to Poetry and Fiction" and "Narrative Writing."

NC: How did you arrive at the title for your new novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus*?

HMV: The tentative title was *Migratory*, suggesting the connection between birds and migrant workers, and also the migratory aspect of love. But a friend of mine persuaded me to change it after reading a scene where I describe how the mother keeps her most precious possessions under a statue of Jesus. The idea itself came from my mother. She had an altar in our house and she used to keep important documents under the Jesus figure.

NC: You dedicate the novel to your parents, who were migrant workers, but also to César Chavez, thereby introducing a political element right from the start. Was it your intention to write a political novel?

HMV: I have always been concerned with issues of dominance and inequity. Because of who and what I am—a woman of color and a writer in a patriarchal society that historically disrespects people of color—it is unavoidable that my concerns will surface in my work. With this novel, however, I tried a different narrative strategy. I tried to allow my characters' stories to speak for themselves. Even though it is a work of fiction, it is based on the lives and emotions of real people—migrant workers like my parents, whose labor helps to put food on the tables of America, yet who themselves must struggle with poverty and outrageous living conditions. So, for me, this book is very political, not because it is ideologically charged, but because the reader grows to love the characters (I hope) and through their lives comes to understand the injustices of their current situation.

NC: Do you ever feel that you betray the Chicano culture when you criticize it



Eloy Rodriguez

Helena María Viramontes

in your writing? I'm thinking specifically about the times when your feminism clashes with some of the more traditional Chicano perceptions of women's roles.

HMV: No, absolutely not. I will write what has to be written. I get criticized from all sides, especially by my male colleagues, and there are certainly people who try to make me feel that I'm betraying my community, but I myself do not believe that. My writing reflects a reality that I've seen with my own eyes. This is what is happening, and it needs to be written about. I do, however, try to really look at the sociological and economic situation of the male characters I write about to avoid portraying them as over-simplified caricatures. A story I wrote, called "The Jumping Bean," dealt with my father, and that was a real exorcism because it made me understand why this man was the way he was, the origin of all the rage that he took out on his family. As a result, the male characters of *Under the Feet of Jesus* are more complicated than they might have been before the piece on my father.

NC: I had noticed a change in your treatment of male characters. Alejo and Perfecto are very important in the novel, whereas in the stories that appear in *The Moths*, the men are not at all prominent.

HMV: You're absolutely right. Sandra Cisneros put it best: "When the door slams on your hand, you're not going to stand there and analyze; you're going to scream and shout." *The Moths* was my screaming and shouting about the pain experienced by the women in my stories. Now I'm going beyond that. All my pre-

vious writing now seems like a kind of preparation for this novel.

NC: What other projects are you working on?

HMV: My next novel, *Their Dogs Came With Them*, is more overtly political. The phrase comes from a line from *The Broken Spears*, which is basically the Aztec account of the Spanish Conquest. An *indígena* records how the Spaniards arrived with their armor clashing like thunder, the dust rising beside them, and the dogs in front of them with their vicious teeth bared. I began working on this book about two years ago, just before the uprising in Los Angeles, in an effort to understand the violence among the young Chicanos in the East L.A. community. My contention is that, if you're treated like a dog, you become a dog. This book absolutely wrenches my soul, but I have to write it.

NC: Do you think that you are now choosing longer, more complicated forms in part because your writing has matured? Is simply having more time to write also a factor?

HMV: I think both. It definitely has to do with confidence in my writing skills. And yes, it has to do with time. My children and my husband understand that this is work. When I am writing, I am not available for mothering or for wifing. It's the only way for me to get work done. If I'm not allowed the time to write, it's actually painful. Now, these past few months, I've had an experience that I never had before: I get to come into my own space and work eight or nine hours without being disturbed. It's such an incredible privilege. I'm overjoyed! I think that's another reason that *Under the Feet of Jesus* achieved the length and the quality that it did. Gabriel García Márquez says that the subconscious is always working, that you have to trust it, and I believe that is true. It takes time for the story to unfold before you. Of course, I can say this all now because the book is completed. Had you asked me several months before, I probably would've groaned and winced and complained.

NC: As a professor of creative writing, you have to funnel your energy from writing to teaching. Is this a difficult task?

HMV: The writing process is so personal, and so ambiguous, that teaching writing is very challenging. It's not just a question of each writer acquiring a technique that works for him or her, since different stories call for different techniques. What I try to do is to help students to find their own voices. Most young writers, when they start out, sound like the people they admire most, not like themselves. So you have all this language that clutters up the writer's true voice. The other thing I work on with students is to help identify the stories they don't know they have. If they take the story in a direction that doesn't work, I like bringing them back to the heart of the story, saying, "No, no. This story is not about this, it's about this sentence over here. This is the story, this is what you have to develop. This part is the challenge, the excitement, the discovery. Stay here and explore."

NC: You have recently joined the faculty of Cornell's English Department as its first Chicana writer. What are the advantages and the disadvantages of being the first and so far only representative of Chicana writing in the Creative Writing program?

HMV: The fact of the matter is that we writers of color are either not getting into MFA programs, or not getting the support we need once we are there. I started an MFA in 1979, and the main criticism I received was "Don't write about Chicanos, write about people." Needless to

say, I left, clutching a bundle of unpublished stories which eventually became *The Moths*. Not until 1992 did I return to complete my MFA with writers Thomas Keneally, Judith Grossman, and Ethan Canin. The program even had a new look: there were two Korean-American writers, a gay Portuguese-American writer, a Chinese writer, myself, a New York lawyer turned writer, as well as others. What fabulous discussions and work came out of this group!

I have two major concerns: First, there is a wealth of expression out there that is not coming into academic communities and one has to wonder why. Second, as a matter of survival, I seek to nurture writers of the "other" America as opposed to what is currently considered "the canon." I am already working closely with a graduate student very much excited by US Latina/o literature. Several other students have approached me looking to start writing and study groups of literature much closer to "the home" of their own interests and life experiences.

There is a real need for more faculty of color at Ivy League schools like Cornell. I am one of very few Chicana writers in the country teaching creative writing at a major university. And that's a shameful situation.

NC: You've moved from a community in which Latinos are predominant to one in which they are not. Has the change been difficult for you?

HMV: The change hasn't dawned on me to the extent that I had anticipated, because I just finished the final draft of my novel. So, to some degree, I'm still mentally in California with my book's characters. Also, there is a Latino community here in Ithaca which I am getting to know, and that helps to overcome any feelings of displacement.

NC: Are you concerned that your physical distance from East Los Angeles, the community that has surrounded you most of your life, will affect your writing?

HMV: There's no way that I'd ever feel so distanced from the Chicano community that my writing would suffer; I feel too strongly about the issues concerning my people. If anything, I think the physical separation may give me more objectivity, thereby improving my writing.

NC: How do you assess the current prospects for Chicana writers?

HMV: Let's say that I'm cautiously optimistic. Chicana writers are now experiencing the same kind of literary excitement that black women writers enjoyed in the '70s and '80s—writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Terri McMillan, and Toni Cade Bambara, all of whom influenced me very much. At the same time, there seems to be a decline in the number of black women writers who are presently being published, so I am concerned about the long-range prospects for Chicana writers as well. But it is encouraging that the works of such extraordinary writers as Sandra Cisneros are already recognized as having lasting value. Even though my own reading is very mixed—in the last few months, I have read Demetria Martinez' *Mother Tongue*; *Lakota Woman*, an oral history by Mary Crow Dog; *Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto, a young Japanese writer; *The Cancer Journals* by Audre Lorde; Emmanuel Bove's *Armand*; and Wanda Coleman's *Heavy Daughter's Blues*—I must admit, I feel most connected to other Chicana writers; they are my literary family, my home.

Nancy Christoph is a graduate student in Romance Studies at Cornell University.

Cornell cinema
Presents

BOSNA!
A FILM BY BERNARD-HENRI LEVY

An enlightening documentary about the current war in Bosnia and the effects of the West's long silence.
With special guest speaker
Professor John Weiss (History).
2/7 @ 7pm WSH

The Ithaca Premieres of...

A fascinating look at the Mississippi Voter Registration Project centered around several civil rights activists who experienced great personal change as a result of their involvement.
With special guest speaker **Professor James Turner (Africana Studies)**
present at the first screening.
2/16 @ 7:30 & 2/19 @ 8pm WSH

FREEDOM
On My MIND
A film by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford

The Jumping Bean

Helena María Viramontes

The following is an excerpt from the short story "The Jumping Bean," which first appeared in a slightly different form in *Pieces of the Heart: New Chicano Fiction* (Chronicle Books, 1993).

One of the trucks sped by loaded with the last of the scaffolds, leaving dust behind, grinding gravel beneath its tires. The welders worked above him, sparks raining to the sides of them, reinforcing the window sealants. Papa looked up at the building while standing on the top step of the Foreman's trailer, admired the erect and shiny structure in all its newness, felt a certain pride, then felt ashamed of that pride. He wiped his boots before entering the trailer. It was unusually hot for a spring day. The Foreman swung his chair back, and without standing up handed him a check, talked in a tight stitched sentence over the buzzing of the air conditioner.

"I do weekend jobs, nothing big, a little extra cash on the side, maybe you can work for me then."

Papa nodded, stared at the check. He studied his name in block typed print, felt the texture of official paper, stared at the amount engraved above his name. He studied the amount as the Foreman talked, translated the amount to a down payment on the pickup he had set his eyes on a few months before. The used truck was in good working condition. The fact that it had a new shiny spare chained to the back made him content. He folded the check neatly so as not to smudge the name or amount, placed it in his billfold, asked in crooked English if he should leave now or hang around until his shift was over, wondered what to do next. He offered his hand to the Foreman who shook it with a hardy grip.

Outside the sun blazed, making the smoky air stick to his lungs. Spring was here too soon. If he couldn't find work by summer, they would have to move to where the migrant work was guaranteed: tomatoes in Indiana, asparagus in Illinois, strawberries in Michigan. But until then, he planned to hammer and chisel the cemented walkway near the laundry lines, make room to plant nopal, verdulagas, chayotes. Of course, things would get better. He was a good worker, one of the best, not afraid to use his back. His lemon tree did not yield this year, but the pomegranates cracked with beet red juice. Things would get better.

He lifted his lunch box, but when he opened it, he discovered a crinkled bag stuffed to the side of the thermos. On the palm of his hand he shook out the

contents, held a handful of jumping beans, watched the half moon beans itch and shake in the heat of the sun.

He remembered repeating the question to María about the spic and the drunk, asked that she explain it to him. She said that he worked with a bunch of assholes, and he slapped her for saying a bad word, and she pushed him aside to get out of the house, holding her hand on her mouth. The children cried, judged him with accusatory eyes and he began yelling at them all, calling them

ry offer to his children and the thought made him content. He walked home to save the bus fare, the beans quiet in his lunch box.

By mid afternoon he entered their small walkway which led to their backyard. He called the children and the neighbor's children over. They rushed and circled around him, craning their necks to see what Papa held in the brown paper sack. He poured the contents on the porch where a strong beam of sun spotlighted the tranquil beans.



Charles Sadler

beggars and leeches and told them to hide or he would kill them all and they scattered, the young girl hiding under the bed where he found her hours later, fast asleep.

It made him wonder about his wife who believed demons possessed her, about his sons who stayed out half the night, the children who scattered in fear, and his beautiful daughter María whom he had slapped with all his might, made him wonder if he was the one being possessed by the questions he did not understand.

He decided against throwing the beans out, returned the contents to the bag. The beans would be a reconciliato-

The children watched, unimpressed by the beans which stood as still as stones. Suddenly, like popcorn bursting, the beans began to twist, tremble, finally jump, and the children laughed in utter astonishment. "Is it magic?" one of the children asked, and the young girl turned to Papa for an answer.

María de la luz opened the screen door to look down at the heads watching the beans jumping. "How do the beans jump?" another asked María, for Papa never gave answers. Curious, María picked one up and bit it open against Papa's protest. Inside the cracked opening, a small white caterpillar unfolded its larva body.

"Leave it alone," Papa ordered, but María immediately bit open another and another.

"They're trapped. They wanna get out." The children grimaced, contorted their faces from nausea as they watched María crack the hard bean between her teeth with delicate force.

"Leave it alone," Papa said in a voice the children were afraid of.

"They're gonna die." First the children looked at María cracking the beans, then turned to look at Papa whose voice was turning louder. The young girl panicked, put her fingers to her mouth.

Papa's temper rose like his nostrils. As of today, he was unemployed, had a sick wife, now couldn't even win over his children's forgiveness without being accused of something. He raised his hand at her insubordination, but before he could strike her, before the children began their screaming and crying again, she caught his raised hand in mid motion, and it stunned him, this betrayal of her nature. María had managed to let free all but one caterpillar. She grasped Papa's hand, the one with the blue thumbnail, laid his hand open. Her eyes melted with red anger. She pressed the single bean in the palm of his hand, steadied her trembling voice.

"Go ahead," she said, a tear streaming down her cheek, "if it means that much to you—"

Go ahead and what? he thought. What was he supposed to do? He had to make her an example for the rest of the children. If he let the caterpillar go, she would certainly feel she had won, which would be only the beginning of her rebellion. If he killed the caterpillar, let it bang itself inside the brown bean, something else would die as well. He just couldn't figure out what. The children stared at his every move and he stared at the single bean.

The young girl shoved her way closer to her papa. She looked up at María de la luz, her nose running, looked at Papa, small and twitching and frightened, looked up at the blank door frame where her mama should be standing right now and putting a stop to all of this madness. Without thinking, the young girl removed the fingers from her mouth, swept the bean from the palm of her Papa's hand. For once, everyone's attention shifted to the young girl. Her brown eyes wide, a dimple forming. She put the bean in her mouth and swallowed it.

Helena María Viramontes is a professor of Creative Writing in the English Department at Cornell University.

Moosewood Restaurant
DeWitt Mall, Ithaca 273-9610
Invites You to Celebrate Valentine's Day by Dining

Winter Hours
Lunch 11:30am-2pm Mon-Sat
Café 2pm-4pm Mon-Sat
Dinner 5:30pm-8:30pm Sun-Th
6pm-9pm Fri and Sat
T-Shirts, Aprons, and Gift Certificates Always Available

DE LA CASA DI PICANTE
WOODFIRE
THREE STAR PIZZAS
AT
TRATTORIA TRE STELLE
MADISON & THIRD ST. 273-8515
CLOSED TUESDAY & WEDNESDAY

Frankenstein as a Single Parent

Nicholas Nicastro

What is a family in Newt Gingrich's America?

The answer is no secret: traditional (two-parent, heterosexual, same race, working) families are held to be the very bedrock of "normal" American society, the lodestones of our moral compass. Interestingly, this is not only the conservative line, it's the conventional wisdom: even convicted criminals appeal to it when, according to a recent ABC News report, 70 percent of them attribute their errant ways to the absence of their fathers in childhood.

Of course, moralizing politicians like William (*The Book of Virtues*) Bennett would hardly have mounted their bully pul-

pits if Americans were actually confident about the value of the family. Causal connections are suggested between crime, addiction, and the fact that about 10 million American households are now headed by a single parent (American Demographics, Inc.). Meanwhile, the current passion for TV-vérité and courtroom video is bringing into our living-rooms the not-so-healthy side of family life that was previously confined to...well, our living-rooms. Gingrich himself has been accused of malicious anachronism in the debate over orphanages, but the Speaker was no Victorian in suggesting that a state-run institution was better for some children than their blood relations.

Hollywood has hardly been aloof to the debate. More "family-oriented" material has been one response, but with the possible exception of Disney animation, America yawns at G-rated fare. Out-and-out criticism of the "non-traditional" family risks generating more business for Larry King and Ted Koppel than actual ticket sales. Rather, the most marketable air for such public anxieties has been in cautionary horror and science-fantasy like Kenneth Branagh's adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and the doily demonism of Neil Jordan's "Interview with the Vampire." The horror genre's history as a venue for otherwise unspeakable or impolitic material is long. The industrial revolution was only in its second generation or so in 1818, when Mary Shelley's novel traced the shadows of the coming technological age by casting it in a Promethean light. James Whale's 1931 film departed radically from Shelley, presenting an infantile monster and a broadly Gothic atmosphere quite foreign to the thrust of the book—where Shelley attempted to reach for the modern, Whale archaized. But ambivalence over old-world *science* and old-world *intellectualism* still characterizes the most renowned movie version. For the Depression-era moviegoing public, haunted by the mechanized killing-fields in the Somme, displaced or trivialized by mechanical modes of production, and facing the West's own Frankenstein in the godless "scientific socialism" of the Soviet Union, the Promethean fire both warmed and burned. So successful has the Whale version been, that Shelley's original, quite understated creation scene is little-remembered:

It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.

Other than pattering raindrops, there are no meteorological pyrotechnics here, no sense of tapping into the primordial energy of seasons and sky. Shelley wrote, after all, at a time when electric technology was still modest, low-powered, and desktop science was the only science. Whale, meanwhile, had to accommodate his public's awareness of "big science," then typified by the work of Ernest Rutherford, Thomas Edison, and the burgeoning laboratories of industry, government, and academe.

Branagh comes full circle: with the current unease with the consequences and expense of big science, his creation apparatus (like Shelley's) is scaled for a city loft, not a castle, and is less flashily technical than Whale's. With its gushing sacks of amniotic fluid and cast-iron mechanical womb, Branagh's vision of the monster's creation is a dark, bloody, private thing; his Dr. Frankenstein is not cut off from his child by lab-coat and goggles, but bare-

chested and vulnerable. At the key moment, the scientist and his creation are not distinguished as doctor and patient, but writhe in the spilled after-birth together. The Branagh version is far more a true "birth" than Whale's, and his Dr. Frankenstein seems that much more a "parent."

But Frankenstein is no loving father. As in Shelley, the creator's strongest reaction to his success is disappointment:

Oh! No mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then, but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived.

To the 20th-century mind, Frankenstein's disgust at his creation seems oddly capricious. Certainly, after working on the project for nearly two years, the "monster's" final appearance couldn't have come as a surprise to him. Considering the significance of his success, it is dubious the creator would reject his child merely on aesthetic grounds; on the contrary, having sacrificed so much on its behalf, he might even be expected to think it beautiful whatever it actually looked like. In Shelley's defense, she far pre-dated the triumph of contextual psychology—for her, an absolute aesthetic of beauty and goodness existed, and an objective judgment was possible. But Branagh can make no such excuses. His failure to find a plausible motive for Frankenstein's rejection is a key flaw in his version.

Undigested as it is, the capriciousness of this parent does serve to point out the essential vanity and *willfulness* of his project. What Frankenstein truly wished to birth was a powerful technique, a new weapon against death. The actual prototype was an unavoidable by-product, an embarrassing residue; Frankenstein is relieved to think it died upon its escape from his lab. This was a pregnancy started for all the wrong reasons.

To this point it would seem coarse to read "Frankenstein" as a grotesque parody of the "endangered" American family. Only the Supreme Pontiff or maybe Speaker Gingrich himself would presume willfulness or vanity has anything to do with the struggle of the teen mother or single divorcee to raise his or her children. But it does make sense if we make one adjustment: if we consider the story from the point of view of the *monster*.

This is, after all, exactly what Branagh does, following Shelley. He presents the monster (Robert DeNiro) escaping plague-ridden Ingolstadt by playing dead in a wagon-load of corpses. This disposability is played out more affectingly in its abortive relationship with a peasant family: watching them from the adjacent barn, the monster longs for the full range of human connections it can never have. Out of sight, it works enough favors for them to be christened "the good spirit of the forest"; but when the "spirit" makes its appearance at last, its new friends brutally repeat the creator's rejection.

It is an unfortunate fact that for every absent parent and busted-up marriage, no matter how amicably-handled or understandable the circumstances, there is a child that feels very much like Shelley's monster. What Shelley objectifies as the monster's physical ugliness parallels the self-image of many of these children, especially the young ones. In what Selma Fraiberg and others have called "the magic years," young minds tend to believe in the power of their own thoughts to affect the real world. Rejection can therefore be personalized as *deserved*: mommy or daddy isn't here because of *me*. Current society produces a large volume of such souls. Meanwhile, like the monster's escape from the plague-

city, there is still life—and anger—left in those cart-loads of disorganized accessories.

Of course, no one would profess children to be disposable. But the aggressive marketing of notions of personal fulfillment and freedom has had its effect. Hollywood was arguably built on these ideals; interestingly, the gossip columnists rarely mention the *other* casualties when serving up the spicy divorce rumors. And in America, as we all know, Hollywood is the preferred reality.

Interview with a Vampire is worlds apart from *Frankenstein* in pedigree. While Mary Shelley gamely tried to anticipate her time, Anne Rice is an enthusiastic post-modern archaizer. On the other hand, director Neil ("The Crying Game," "Mona Lisa") Jordan is far more welcome in the East Village than stodgy Branagh and his Shakespearean pretensions. The result is mutual bafflement: Rice scratched her head very publicly over Jordan's casting of Tom Cruise as Lestat, and Jordan's film is so talky and balky it seems as if he was quivering before Dostoevsky's prose, not Rice's.

Yet "Interview's" family politics are equally cautionary. Lestat's recruitment of Louis (Brad Pitt) is a sort of "birth" in reverse, in this case to the world of the "undead." But unlike "Frankenstein," Lestat fathers Louis out of a genuine affection and desire for companionship. The vampire-child Claudia (Kirsten Dunst) rounds out Lestat's decidedly non-traditional family; the film derives most of its humor from the trio's blood-soaked brand of domesticity.

"Interview" wears its homoeroticism on its ruffled sleeve, and in conjunction with Lestat's hunger for family, the film seems to endorse the viability of gay marriage. But only superficially: like Frankenstein's monster, Claudia and Louis come to resent the gift of their creation, and their family ends in mutual repulsion. Claudia seeks out a "real" (female) mother among the Parisian vampires; Louis' last acts in the film are to reject Lestat's love a second time, and to reject the opportunity to "father" a new generation of undead.

Interestingly, the families of both *Frankenstein* and *Lestat* live and die in *luxury*. In this may lie these films' best subversive element: the suggestion that affluence and family values are an unlikely combination. Where the current furor has centered on welfare queens and ghetto delinquency, the destruction of families by divorce in suburbia has actually occurred in an atmosphere of unprecedented wealth and freedom. The Hollywood aristocracy itself, the clear object of so much American aspiration, suffers marriages with shorter shelf-lives than most non-irradiated produce. While Gingrich seeks to replace the welfare state with an "opportunity society," opportunity alone clearly won't repair the family.

Indeed, the truth can be quite the opposite: while privation destroys some families, it seems to foster others. This little-remembered American reality is compellingly illustrated in Gallein Armstrong's fine adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*—it is certainly not an excess of wealth and opportunity that created the lively domestic culture of the March sisters. More likely it was hard necessity and, curiously, a lack of more attractive alternatives. True family values were arguably forged in the dire dilemmas like those reflected in "The Grapes of Wrath" and "Little Women," not the upper-middle class suburban fantasia of "The Brady Bunch."

Of course, you won't hear Newt Gingrich suggest that a capital-gains tax cut could be as inimicable to family values as welfare dependency. In Newt's world, the virtues of affluence, mobility, opportunity, and family are perfectly compatible. The promise of such unmixed blessings is perhaps the most bizarre creation of all.

Nicholas Nicastro is a writer living in Ithaca.

JEFF'S BOOKS

THE BOOK LOVER'S PARADISE YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO MISS!

Up to 80% off every day.

Mon-Wed, Fri 9:30-6:00

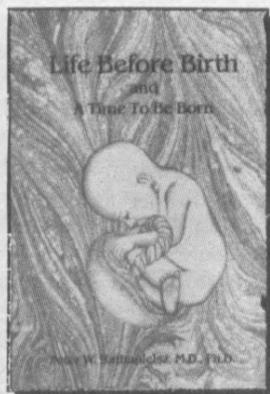
Thursday 9:30-7:00

Saturday 10:00-5:00

Wholesale and Retail

Midtown Plaza, Main St.
DOWNTOWN ROCHESTER

716-454-6063



Life Before Birth and A Time To Be Born

Peter W. Nathanielsz, M.D., Ph.D.

Discover the fascinating wonders of our prenatal origins, and the challenges of independent life.

Promethean Press ISBN: 0-916859-55-X
Available from a bookstore near you.

PIANOS

- Rebuilt
- Reconstructed
- Bought
- Sold
- Moved
- Tuned
- Rented



Ithaca Piano Rebuilders
(607) 272-6547

310 4th St., Ithaca (Off Hancock St. 2 blocks from Rt. 13)

Complete rebuilding services.
No job too big or too small. Call us.

The Impossibility of Restitution

THE ANGEL OF HISTORY

Carolyn Forché

HarperCollins, 84 pages, \$20

Scott Minar

William Burroughs was once quoted as saying "Surprise equals life." Many artists, and poets in particular, seem to sense this intuitively and thus quite rightly fear repeating themselves, doing again something they have already done well. This is what a friend of mine would call "writing poems we know how to write." And of course all art is involved in a search for something new. Yet when established artists take risks, stretch out toward some new place, we are often disappointed. I distinctly remember that in the eighties, when W.S. Merwin put out a book of love poems, many of my friends who liked Merwin were disappointed. They wanted more of that dense, masterful verse about death and decay, among other things, that they had come to expect from him. Conversely, Allen Ginsberg is often taken to task for *not* changing his style. But the fact of the matter is that poets either stretch and grow or it is likely they will stagnate; there doesn't seem to be much in between. The word among readers a year ago was that Carolyn Forché's new book wasn't as good as her last one, that it was fragmented and tough to follow. I disagree. The poet, in this case, was stretching and growing into a new style, and in doing so, keeping her art alive. Readers must stretch and grow with her.



Harry Mattison

Carolyn Forché

The Angel of History, Forché's third book of poetry, has many of the same trademarks of her earlier works, characteristics that have made her, for the last decade or so, one of the more highly praised younger poets in America. Forché has proven herself perhaps the best part of the American conscience in the seventies and the eighties and one of the few prominent witnesses to atrocities in El Salvador and Central Europe, as well as in her own scarred life. With *The Angel of History*, Carolyn Forché should probably lose the appellation "younger" for good. This is the work of a poet at the height of her powers—subtle, intricate, filled with a painful beauty.

Readers of her earlier works will generally not recognize the form of the poems in this book. For the most part, the lines are long, as are the poems themselves. The first three chapters are each composed of one long poem of eighteen, twenty-seven, and eleven pages, respectively. The last two chapters are made up of three poems each; these poems are much shorter, no more than two pages. However, despite some departures in form, the transcultural, meditative nature of Forché's poetry remains unchanged:

*In the night-vaulted corridors of the Hotel-Dieu, a sleepless woman pushes her stretcher
along the corridors of the past. Bonjour, madame. Je m'appelle Ellie.*

There were trains, and beneath them, laddered fields.

*Autumns the fields were deliberately burned by a fire so harmless children ran through it
making up a sort of game.*

*Women beat the flames with brooms and blankets, so the fires were said to be under
control.*

*As for the children, they were forbidden to ask about the years before they were born.
Yet they burned the fields, yet everything was said to be under control
with the single phrase death traffic.*

This striking, crystalline imagery is typical of the author's work. The last line is arresting, especially when paired with the fire imagery and the children who inhabit this poem. But what is genuinely different here is, I think, a stronger sense on the author's part of the irresolute, of the impossibility of restitution for the horrors of this century. When a poet takes on subjects at the level of the Holocaust, perhaps this is inevitable. In the crucible between the deed and

its unforgivability, the pathos of these poems is often almost unbearable.

Forché focuses on the events and people, some of them artists and thinkers like herself, in Europe and Japan during World War II and afterward. We often hear their voices in these poems, and the mixture of personae is quite effective and commanding. The bombing of Hiroshima belongs here, as do the brief reminders of El Salvador (one of the primary subjects of her last collection, *The Country Between Us*). Finally, the occasional insertion of the sensuous lends an exquisiteness to this book that is rare:

*There are times when the child seems not yet to have crossed into the world
Despite having entered a body
Memory a wind passing through the blood trees within us
Someone was supposed to have come
He wrote: I tore open your letter and licked the envelope's seal for any lingering trace of
you*

It is clearly a mark of the author's skill that desperation and desire can be fused as they are in the final lines of this quotation.

But one of the more poignant features of this collection is its desire to unify the atrocities of this century into one great *crime contre l'humanite*, precisely what such acts are:

*And just now it was as if someone not alive were watching,
so I asked if he'd suffered very much and he said no.*

*But when I came back from the border something odd happened.
It had been more than seventy days and I weighed nothing.
My bags were no heavier than usual but I couldn't lift them.
After a drink and some talk I went for a rest.
When I woke my room was filled with vultures
They were hopping about the room, belching and vomiting flesh,
as you saw them at Puerto Diablo and El Playon.*

Exactly as you saw them.

Forché recognizes that inevitably, it seems, we are a species that feeds on itself. Yet how do we accept or navigate the constant onslaught in this century of a nearly unbearable barbarousness? Among the many things that are admirable about Ms. Forché's work is her unerring sense of what is lost when a human life is taken, and she shows this sense in a way that shakes the cord of a shared humanity and forces us to be aware of the other.

The fact that *The Angel of History* is a kind of breakaway into new territory leads the author to set out a defense of the book itself. In her endnotes, she states that "The first-person, free-verse, lyric-narrative poem of my earlier years has given way to a work which has desired its own bodying forth: polyphonic, broken, haunted, and in ruins, with no possibility of restoration," ideas that may be exemplified in the following lines:

*There was so much weeping, she said, but never anyone.
A language even paper would refuse,
bell music rolling down the cold roofs,
their footsteps disappearing as they walked.*

*She stood on the landing of disbelief in Brno as if the war were translucent behind us,
the little ones in graves the size of pillows.*

Though there is no "possibility of restoration," one must ask whether the author's search for a pure expression of these horrors constitutes a kind of salvation. The past is not forgotten, and therefore, there may be some small reason to hope.

Despite the attempt, I cannot do justice to *The Angel of History*. It is a work of a very high order, certainly one of the best books of poetry published in 1994, and the achievement is magnified because the author accomplished it while experimenting with form and content. If Carolyn Forché is among the finest American poets, as some critics believe, the irony of this is that she is not fully ours. If Forché is anything, she is a citizen of the world. Hers is a poetry of many places, of many times, and the many voices of people whose words might otherwise not reach the breathable air and us. Ultimately, the question that *The Angel of History* seems to ask of its readers is whether we are willing to feel the shared blood of our humanity and face the monstrosity of our past with the same compassionate intensity that the author does.

Scott Minar is a writer who teaches Creative Writing at Elmira College.


GODIVA
Chocolatier

For almost seventy years,
Godiva chocolates have romanced
the heart, delighted the senses
and satisfied the soul.

When you think about it, life is
brimming with moments worth
celebrating: a graduation, promotion,
new baby, new home
... the possibilities are endless.
And each unique occasion
celebrated with these tempting
morsels is a sumptuous reminder
of just how sweet life is!

EXQUISITE SPRING FLOWERS & ROSES
FOR VALENTINE'S DAY!

The Plantation

130 Ithaca Commons • 607-273-7231

Daily Delivery in Town and
Across the Nation! Call 800-443-8667

New & Used Books Bought and Sold



DEWITT BUILDING
215 N. CAYUGA ST.
ITHACA, NY 14850

M-F 9:30-9:30, SAT 9:30-6, SUN 11-6 / 607-273-5055

NATURAL
FOODS

and a large selection of
alternative health books



Green Star

COOPERATIVE MARKET

701 West Buffalo Street

607-273-9392

NEW HOURS: M-Sat 9-9, Sun 10-7

OPEN TO EVERYONE

The BOOKPRESS

IS AVAILABLE AT THE FOLLOWING LOCATIONS IN ITHACA & BEYOND:

| | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| ABC Café | Greenstar Coop |
| Aladdin's | Hickey's Music |
| Alphabet Soup | Irving's Deli |
| Autumn Leaves | Ithaca Bakery |
| Café Decadence | Ithaca College |
| City Health Club | La Forza |
| Center Ithaca | Ludgate Farms |
| Cinemapolis | The Mad Café |
| Collegietown Bagels | Mano's Diner |
| Cornell Cinema | Mayers |
| Cornell University | New Alexandrian |
| Country Couple | Northeast Bagels |
| Courtside Fitness | Phoenix Books |
| DeWitt Mall | Rebob Records |
| Fall Creek Cinema | State Street Diner |
| Gino's Pizza | Stella's Café |

Coming Community College (Coming)
 Gil's Book Loft (Binghamton)
 Jeff's Books (Rochester)
 Seymour Public Library (Auburn)
 The FSA Bookstore (Fredonia)

Geography of Nowhere

continued from page 7

"law of the distant suburbs" (the injunction to keep moving, or to retreat into the sanctuary of the hotel room), Maspero's journey turns out to be as arduous and frustrating as the mythologized colonial adventures that constitute our received notions of "travel."

Secret places were there before his eyes, waiting to be discovered, unknown even to those who traveled through them daily and often to those who lived there; incomprehensible, disjointed spaces which used to be pieces of geography which we really must try and rewrite.

The task of Maspero's travelogue, then, is to reconstruct and recuperate forgotten populations and geographies. He is sensitive, however, to the warnings of cultural critics and activists like Frantz Fanon and, more recently, Edward Said, who have demonstrated how the process of colonization produced a series of pseudo knowledges—travel literature, ethnology, forms of anthropology—which present an exotic or threatening Other against which the stable, rational identities of the European metropolis (London or Paris) are continually fortified and normalized. Maspero is aware that his enterprise runs the risk of replicating these very oppositions in the form of a further distinction between the metropolis and the "savages" of the suburbs. Indeed, the areas surrounding Paris have long served the city as dumping points for what both metropolitans and provincials imagined as undesirable, polluting, or unhygienic elements. As Maspero points out, Villepoint was used during the 19th century as the site of an asylum for consumptive women, Pavillon-sous-Bois was the site of a sewerage farm, and the suburbs and estates around Paris today serve as a way of exiling and containing what the newspaper *Le Monde* describes as "destitute people."

This scenario of continual banishment and spatial marginalization has taken on a new and potentially more inflammatory form in the recent tensions between the authorities and the French Algerian population, and Maspero's desire to depart from the stereotypes of travel narratives that reinforce images of racial and cultural difference is an important index of the book's topicality and of its author's political commitment. With these concerns in mind, no doubt, he eschews both ethnological pretensions and sensationalized reports of drug addiction and rampant crime in depressed immigrant communities, attempting instead to suggest, somewhat impressionistically yet nonetheless evocatively, the geo-historical tensions which inform the areas he wanders through. Equally evident is Maspero's disdain for the popular equation of cultural and historical significance with the museum artifacts and monuments that constitute the center of Paris as Europe's premiere tourist attraction.

Paris had become a business hypermarket and a

cultural Disneyland. Where had the life gone? To the suburbs. "All around" could not, therefore, be wasteland, but a land full of people and life. Real people and real life... If Paris had emptied, if it was no more than a ghost town, didn't that mean the true center was now "all around"?

Meaning is located for Maspero not in the objectified remains of a fantastic, imperial past, but in the less monumental terrain of the everyday. In making this shift he asserts his fellowship with the French cultural theorists, led by Henri Lefebvre, whose work has collectively established the ordinary rhythms of everyday life as an important site of investigation.

What Maspero discovers in the suburbs, however, is space largely given over to a world of perpetual motion. In Garon, next to Roissy, Maspero relates his bewilderment when confronted with the "juxtaposed horizontal and vertical divisions" of a geography fragmented by its incorporation into systems of transportation:

there's all that asphalt running over your head, the railway line, and the motorways you keep cutting across, the bridges and tunnels, and all the vehicles pelting along, overtaking, overlapping and separating, watch your left, watch your right, and not a single pedestrian to give the whole thing a scale; no, it's not a space—these are... species of spaces, pieces of badly stuck together space, always giving you the feeling that a missing piece of a puzzle is needed to give the whole thing a sense.

In the more affluent part of Aulney, guard dogs leap from behind fences at Maspero and Frantz, indicating the perils of walking on foot through areas that were only meant to be driven through: "They've got it in only for pedestrians; cars can drive on past, the beasts know they're inoffensive... Can you be guilty of walking down the street?" The history of these suburbs has been one of constant movement, mobilization, immigration, and relocation accompanying the rise of industrialism and embodied in continual migrations from the capital and the colonies. The everyday, it turns out, might take place in discrete locations, but it is also marked by constant movement, a continual process of social and spatial dislocation. Thus the suburbs inscribe and continue to be immersed in the histories of capitalism and colonialism. Rapid post-war industrialization created the need for an instant supply of moveable labor, filled by immigrants from former colonies who came to constitute a permanently dislocated population within France—an underclass haunting the dream of French modernization and national prosperity with unpleasant reminders of the French colonial past. In this process the hierarchies of colonial Algeria were preserved and re-established in France. Race remains a sign of class difference and marginalization, but the frontier across which this threatening difference proliferates is now

twenty minutes from the center of Paris.

The Aulney 3000 estate epitomizes this process. Appropriately known as "The Liner," indexing the assumed mobility of its inhabitants, the estate was built in 1970, isolated from its surroundings by a giant motorway. Its inhabitants came from Paris, Africa, and Turkey, treating the estate as a temporary home, a transit point in a migratory process that would hopefully lead them to more central and integrated locations. But the logic of Aulney 3000's construction was one of economic rationalization. Right next door was a new Citroën factory in need of an unskilled labor force. The new housing estate attracted a transplanted population which would fill the need for an instant proletariat. By the mid-'70s, however, the factory was downsizing, and soon after, half of the jobs created in 1971 were gone and Aulney 3000's population drifted into unemployment and increasing economic destitution. Unable to afford to leave, barely able to afford to stay, the community finished in stasis and permanent dislocation. Aulney 3000 is not a place—it is a stalled migration in which the casualties of industrialization are contained at a safe distance, quarantined, effectively policed by the inaccessibility of transport out of Aulney.

A half-dozen stations down the line Maspero arrives at Drancy, whose history is even more ominously characterized by the relationship between transported populations and racial difference. During the German occupation, Cité de la Muette, now another drab housing estate, was a transit point on the line to death camps in eastern and central Europe. According to an official statement issued from Vichy in 1940, the camp was set up to "guard French nationals and foreigners grouped together as an administrative measure," in other words for the supervising of "undesirables." Some 74,000 people passed through Drancy en route to Auschwitz, Maidanek, and Sobibor. The camp functioned as an *Umschlagplatz* (a transfer point), and Maspero's meditations on it serve to enforce, starkly and unambiguously, the connection between racialized hierarchies and the varying uses of space and transport to consolidate and contain them. At Drancy, the discrete location was only a point on a journey that ended with obliteration of the passenger.

Roissy Express shows us the logic of modernization. Beyond the world of advertising, glamorous holiday packages, and mass media icons of industrial progress, the effects of modernization extend to places and populations that are forced into invisibility despite their proximity to the center. Maspero's point might finally be that proximity is no longer a guarantee of communal solidarity, as it was for the inhabitants of Gonesse in 1783, who with penetrating insight attacked as an apocalyptic monstrosity what was to become their future.

Andrew McCann is a graduate student in English at Cornell University.

Distribute the Bookpress

...and help us
by helping You!

We will send you 25 copies of each issue for EIGHT months. In addition, you will receive a 15% DISCOUNT off our regular display ad rates. And as a BONUS, we'll include your store each month in *the Bookpress* as a distribution location at no additional cost!

All you have to do is contribute \$50 to cover shipping & handling for the entire year; and of course, distribute the paper FREE OF CHARGE to your customers.

CALL US TODAY: (607) 277-2254

THE PHOENIX BOOKS

50,000 Volumes

1608 Dryden Rd.
Between Ithaca and
Dryden on Rt. 13

OPEN

Daily 10 - 6
Sunday 1 - 5

607-347-4767



BRUNCH Café Dewitt

Sunday 11-2

- ≈ Waffles
- ≈ Fritters
- ≈ Crêpes
- ≈ Omelettes
- etc...

Dewitt Mall, Ithaca
273-3473

1994 Elections

continued from page 3

Dissenting voices argue that the Democrats' only real alternative is to move to the left with a "give 'em hell" style campaign that Truman used in 1948 to beat Dewey. If the soil is ripe for such a populist appeal—something that Kevin Phillips has argued for years—then why doesn't Clinton do this? I believe he understands that waging such a campaign would risk losing control of the Democratic party to marginalized citizens who might become empowered by such an electoral struggle. He and the Democrats know that their fundamental purpose is to take care of the political and economic elite. Noam Chomsky argues that this is in fact the essential purpose of our political system:

Only to the extent that the demands of the wealthy...are satisfied can the population at large hope for a decent existence in their role as servants of private power....

What will most likely occur in the next two years is a Clinton move to the right in an attempt to garner votes, sacrificing programs for the poor and sacrificing individuals who have antagonized the right—as witnessed by his sacking of Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders. Gingrich called her firing "good for the country and good for the president..." Clinton has already responded to Republican attacks that he has left the military "underfunded" by asking for a \$25 billion increase over the next six years. He is essentially following Bush's five-year Pentagon plan, leav-

ing no alternative for voters who wish to see the military budget cut significantly and funds used to cure domestic ills. Government seems out of control as many representatives place their own interests and those of the wealthy power brokers they serve over the political and economic needs of their constituents. The "color of money"—the material expression of the domination of private power over the public good—undermines democracy and the political process. The Republican right "revolution" is only a more blatant expression of this unhappy truth than its tepid Democratic alternative.

John Marciano lives in Ithaca and teaches at SUNY Cortland.

Lucian Freud's Painting *Leigh Under the Skylight*

Brow furrowed, a dark stubble on upper lip and chin, he gazes down in solitude from on Olympian height, one massive hip hidden by a huge hand, his attitude

defined by nakedness, by vulnerability and pride, the giant trunk, poised in midair, balancing on thick, elegant, balletically crossed legs. From the brown triangle of pubic hair

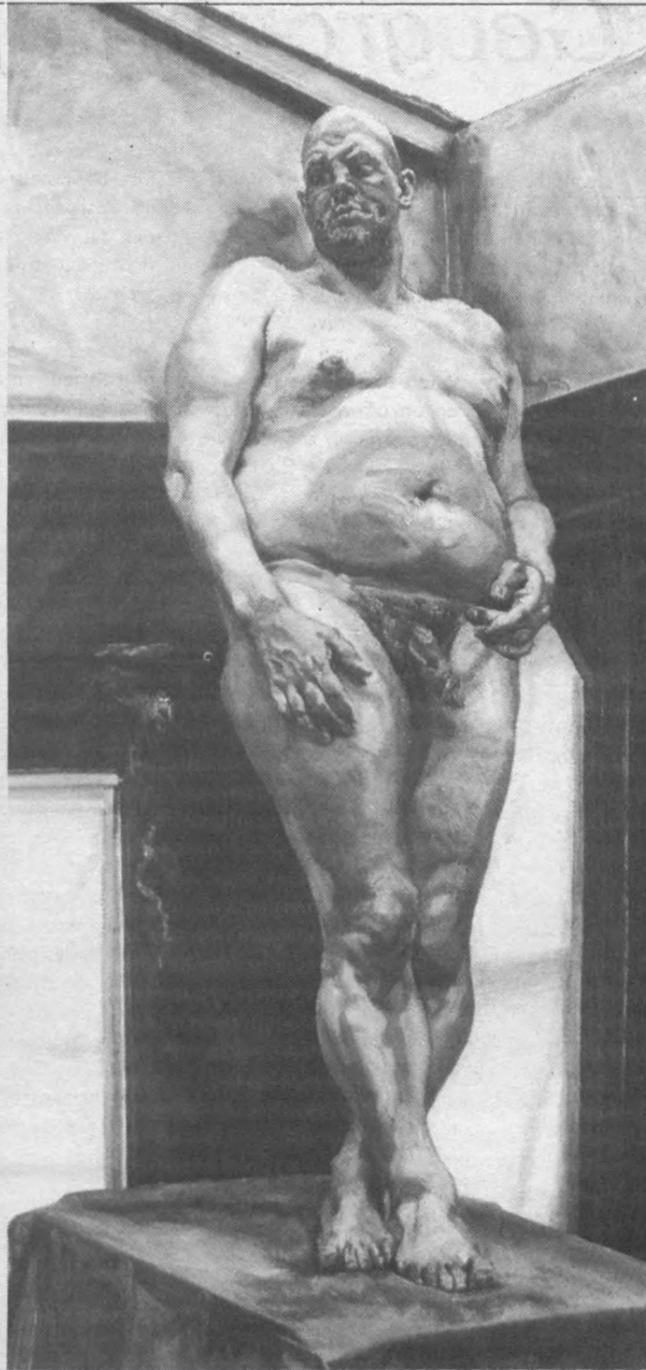
between his thighs emerges, unashamed, the penis. Light clothes the bare shoulders, chest, the sagging breasts. The crown of the head, haloed, floats high above the unrepentant flesh.

—John Bowers

For half a century the German-born British painter Lucian Freud has concentrated on the human face and figure with paintings richly detailing the fleshiness of the naked form. While Freud's subjects continue to be family and friends, his work is most often associated with model Leigh Bowery, the Australian designer and performance artist whose massive nakedness inspired some of Freud's greatest recent paintings.

Leigh Under the Skylight, 1994 (at right), is Freud's last painting of Bowery who (before his death in London on New Year's Eve) had attained notoriety as a freaky cult star of clubs in New York and London. Through Bowery's natural performance instinct and Freud's astonishing ability to "expose" the human form, the two achieved an exhibition of self-expression, illuminating the human figure from without as from within.

(photo reprinted from *The New Yorker*, January 16, 1995)



For Whom the Bell Curves

continued from page 9

analytical crimes of both commission and omission. Even by the standards of its narrow empiricism, it falsifies the "facts" about cognitive gains and "fade out." Worse still are the systematic omissions of the social and economic contexts within which such "data" must be evaluated if it is to have any real meaning. Murray and Herrnstein's assumption that Head Start alone should be sufficient to ensure and sustain cognitive growth sidesteps any discussion of what would constitute reasonable criteria of achievement. Absurd too is the implicit assumption that a pre-school program, even if it were to receive adequate resources, could by itself meet the myriad needs of poor children.

What emerges from the discussion of Head Start in *The Bell Curve* is the authors' use of a nasty gambit: first, inadequately fund a program for poor children, then deny whatever success is achieved in the face of overwhelming obstacles, and finally conclude that the program must be eliminated because the children are intellectually inferior.

Intelligence and *The Bell Curve*

Although virtually every page of *The Bell Curve* mentions IQ, nowhere in the book is an IQ test itself described. Perhaps some sample questions will help to demystify the nature of this instrument. (I've changed the questions slightly to avoid violating copyright laws.)

- Who wrote Macbeth?
- Who was Charles Lindbergh?
- What is the capital of France?
- What was Louis Pasteur famous for?
- Define the following words: placid, diatribe, resilience, licentious.
- If 12 machines are needed to complete

a job in 9 days, how many machines would be needed to finish the job in half a day?

—Explain the following: why does land in New York City cost more than land in Kansas?

—In what way are the following alike: sculpture-sonnet; bud-kernel?

Can anyone other than a devout hereditarian really believe that these questions actually measure an inherent something called "g" (general intelligence)?

Nowhere have "g" proponents proven that "general intelligence" exists, or, if it does, that standard IQ tests can measure it. Murray and Herrnstein certainly don't show this. After asserting the existence of "g" and that "IQ tests measure it most accurately," they launch a preemptive strike against further discussion by declaring the matter "beyond significant technical dispute." For such contemporary critics of these interpretations of intelligence as Richard Lewontin, Leon Kamin, Ethel Tobach, Steven J. Gould, Jane Mercer, and Howard Gardner, to name a few, this "case closed" summation must come as a surprise.

But Murray and Herrnstein's political agenda becomes even more transparent when they go on to relate IQ to social behavior such as crime. "As a group, criminals are below average in intelligence," they assert. To prove this, the book reviews violent crimes and property crimes—robbery, murder, and assault—arrest rates, criminal convictions, and similar statistics. There is no question that these categories are related to IQ test scores (which in itself does not mean intelligence is causal). However, the correlation between low IQ scores and "crime" can only be maintained by the omission of whole categories of crimes: savings and loan banking fraud, political cover-ups, corporate pollution, tobacco

company deceptions, pharmaceutical companies withholding evidence about life-threatening products. Had Murray and Herrnstein included these examples, the empirical connection between IQ and crime would have been different because the latter crimes are those of the "cognitive elite."

Conclusion

The Bell Curve is a manipulative exercise in pseudo-science that twists and turns with each piece of "evidence." No distortion or misrepresentation of "data" and no insidious conclusion is beneath Murray and Herrnstein as they attempt to take the reader rightward, ever rightward to explain and justify the Great Divide.

One final point: Charles Murray (Herrnstein is dead) has been peeved over the attention reviewers and critics have given to discussions of race in the book. *The Bell Curve* is very much about class, he complains. There is a grain of truth here. The racism in the Head Start section and throughout the book is always intertwined with an overriding classism—an unending assault on the unemployed poor, the underemployed poor, the working poor, working people a little better off than poor, and all those who will be slip-sliding further and further away from the so-called "cognitive elite." African-Americans are proportionately more represented in these "lower" groups, but that should not give comfort to whites at similar levels. The bell curve tolls for them too.

Gerald S. Coles teaches in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at the University of Rochester. A bibliography on this essay is available by sending a SASE to the author c/o The Bookpress.

CLASSIFIEDS

WRITING WORKSHOPS

EMMA'S WRITING CENTER FOR WOMEN

offers on-going, small-group workshops for women at all levels of writing experience. Individualized editorial and consulting services are also available.

For more information, contact:
Irene Zahava,
(607) 273-4675

21st ANNUAL FEMINIST WOMEN'S WRITING WORKSHOP

Poet-in-Residence, Ruth Stone
July 9th-16th, 1995
SASE: Box 6583, Ithaca, NY 14851

FOR RENT

NORTHWEST ADIRONDACKS WINTERGREEN POINT COTTAGE ON STAR LAKE

Quiet, 4-bedroom, 1-1/2 bath, modern kitchen, fireplace, porches, private sand beach, dock, canoe, 900' frontage. Close to trails, skating rink, golf. Weekly/monthly rentals. Flier.
(315) 677-9278

CLASSIFIED RATES

Classified ad rates are \$10.00 for the first ten words and \$.75 for each additional word. Send text, with exact capitalization, punctuation, **boldface**, and *italics* indicated to: The Bookpress, The DeWitt Building 215 N. Cayuga St., Ithaca, NY 14850. Please include check or money order.

NEW TITLES

Frank Zappa

The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play

by BEN WATSON

A landmark in pop criticism in the tradition of Greil Marcus and Jon Savage.

St. Martin's Press, \$27.50 cloth

French Literary Fascism

Nationalism, Anti-Semitism & the Ideology of Culture

by DAVID CARROLL

Illustrating how both traditional and modern concepts of art figure in the elaboration of fascist ideology.

Princeton University Press, \$29.95 cloth

A Stroke of Genius

Illness & Self Discovery

by PAUL WEST

"A memoir of plagues and revelations."

—Chicago Tribune
Viking, \$21.95 cloth

Anna Akhmatova

Poet & Prophet

by ROBERT REEDER

"(Her story) is among the most poignant that our century has had to show."

—The New York Times
St. Martin's Press, \$35 cloth

Copper Crucible

How the Arizona Miners' Strike of 1983 Recast Labor-Management Relations in America

by JONATHAN D. ROSENBLUM

"The essence of the Chicano struggles for social, economic, and political equality."

—Alfredo C. Montoya
ILR Press, \$16.95 paper

Grace of the Storm Country

Bridget Meeds

Ithaca has been the home of many writers, but none as prolific and yet forgotten as native-born Grace Miller White. And perhaps none has used Ithaca and its people so well as subjects. She wrote more than sixty books in her lifetime, including five "Storm Country" novels set in Ithaca of the early 20th century. Portraying conflict between the squatter community of the Inlet, called the "Silent City," and the permanent residents of the town, her novels are peopled with innocent virgins, evil lechers, greedy and corrupt officials, and noble students.

Grace Miller White was apparently a strong, unusual woman, but her writing fell into the category of popular trash novels and little critical attention has been accorded her work. At most, she is valued as an unwitting social historian. However, her writing is vibrant and interesting, and does reflect some of the social currents of her time, including the suffrage and temperance movements.

Born October 24, 1868, on the west shore of Cayuga Lake, White was one of fourteen children of Scottish immigrant John Miller and his English wife Olivia Collings. The Millers owned their land but shared it with eight squatter families—an arrangement not uncommon in Ithaca during the late 19th century, when the Inlet was nearly completely settled by immigrants living illegally on the undesirable swamp land. The men, called "Rhiners" because of the Inlet's imagined resemblance to the Rhine, worked as laborers in the shipping industry while often poaching and scavenging for food to survive. The women raised the children and might have worked as laundresses or prostitutes, although this information is hard to confirm. The families generally suffered from malnutrition, disease, poor shelter, and flooding.

As the twentieth century arrived, so did the railroads and canals, and suddenly the pressure to displace the squatter settlements became more imminent. The residents were seen as diseased, ignorant, physically and morally corrupt. Merchants began driving the squatters from the land, with both legal and not-so-legal means. From 1905 through 1910, as part of the federal government's project to widen and deepen the Inlet, most of the remaining residents were finally forced off their lands, although the last shacks weren't removed until 1929.

It was against this backdrop that Grace Miller, a thirty-six-year-old single mother with three children (she separated from her husband Homer White in 1904), began to write. At first, she published only dime novels based on the plots of current popular plays. She is reported to have written 23 books in 1904, and at least 14 during 1907. Then, in 1909, she published *Tess of the Storm Country*, her first original novel and the first in a series set in upstate New York. She wrote it, reportedly, as distraction while on a month-long visit to her son in Munich. Her brother Thomas served as editor. The novel's combination of high melodrama with a Christian morality in

the Silent City setting was a success, and while continued to write in this style, with such titles as *The Secret of the Storm Country*, *Storm Country Polly*, *Judy of Rogues Harbor*, and *From the Valley of the Missing*. In total, she wrote twelve novels set either in Ithaca, the Erie Canal, or Long Island. Her other publications were self-help books and pamphlets, including her last, "How to Be Happy," which was published in 1930.

Although she was certainly a prolific

In *Tess of the Storm Country*, for instance, White sets the scene for romance:

While Tessibel lighted the fire, Frederick sat huddled in the wooden rocking-chair, still wrapped in the crimson altar-cloth, and watched the girl, who, as she moved clumsily to and fro, uttered no sound save now and then a characteristic grunt. Instinct told the squatter that she would choke the sensitive throat of the student if she raised the dust by sweeping and she

incoming canal boats brought in an uneducated, indigent class of individuals who generally would stay in port a short period and then move on. This traffic left a sediment of population.... A low average of intelligence, morals, and health was prevalent in the "Silent City."... There was the danger that undesirable citizens would filter from their ranks into the larger community.... The "squatter" village has left to modern Ithaca a heritage of social pathology: indigent, shiftless, alcoholic, criminal, or degenerate adults with mentally deficient children.

What, in an atmosphere like this, made Grace Miller White think differently?

There are many speculations we can make, some reinforced by interviews she gave. White herself was the child of immigrants and probably shared dialect and social customs with squatters in early life, despite the later cosmopolitan image she cultivated. In 1950, she recalled the squatters on her father's land:

Yes, we knew the squatters well. Eight families of them lived on my father's property. We never had an egg we could use on our own, and there was never any more milk left in the cow. My father used to say, "Never mind, they're starving. Run up to the neighbors and get some eggs and milk." We had a saying in our family that no sooner had a hen begun to cackle than a hand went under the hen and caught the egg. But it was lovely to be able to feed them.

White's ear for squatter dialect is consistent and rings true, and there is clear evidence in the novels of her empathy with the economic struggle of the residents of the "Silent City."

Despite the rosy sheen she cast over her childhood memories, White was no stranger to difficult circumstances. Certainly she used her writing in later life to support herself and her children while single. In a 1916 *Ithaca Journal* interview in honor of *The Secret of the Storm Country*, she said:

What success I have had has been through hard work. While I had a natural bent for writing and wrote poems as early as my tenth year, and while I love my work, still I have done it primarily because I had to earn a living for myself and my children.

Grace Miller White was an energetic woman, an eloquent advocate, and a historian of a people who might otherwise have been forgotten. As the Rhiners were driven from their community in the first decade of this century and their particular ways and customs were absorbed into the mainstream, she chronicled their lives. She has been the principal source of information on the Inlet community for contemporary historians and should be acknowledged as such.

Bridget Meeds is a writer who lives in Ithaca.

The DeWitt Historical Society is showing an exhibit through April at the Tompkins County Museum at 401 E. State Street, featuring Grace Miller White and entitled "West End Story: A Neighborhood Forever Changed."



(reprinted from *Tess of the Storm Country*, W.J. Watt and Co. Publishers, first edition 1909)

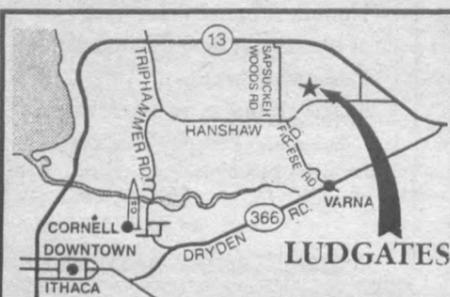
Book illustration of Tessibel Skinner, by Howard Chandler Christy

writer, critical attention paid to Grace Miller White has been scarce. No critical responses from the time she was publishing, if there were any, appear to have survived, and the worth of her upstate novels has been ignored in favor of works such as *David Harum*. And, in truth, this lack of attention might seem justified when considering the lurid purple prose style with which she was enamored. Admittedly, *Tess of the Storm Country* is far from high art. White wrote these novels very quickly. She had a flair for histrionics, no doubt influenced by her writing of play synopses, and a style which sometimes produced results more hilarious than may have been intended.

refrained from using a broom, but Frederick wished vaguely that she would gather up the fish bones and crumbs of bread from her path that they might not crunch so audibly under her heavy boots.

But despite the sometimes labored prose, *Tess* addressed real and important social issues and was quite popular. White was writing sympathetically about a group of people who were, at that very time, being driven from their homes. Henry Abt, an early Ithaca historian, had this to say about the Rhiners in 1926:

During a large part of the last century,



THE GOURMET FARM STORE

the most unique farm market
in the county

OPEN 365 DAYS A YEAR

9 A.M. - 9 P.M.

1552 HANSHAW ROAD • 257-1765

Fresh Cut Flowers
Fresh Fruits & Vegetables
Gourmet Specialty Foods
Coffee Beans
Local Baked Goods
Beans, Rice, Grains, Nuts
Dried Fruit & Specialty Flours

