

# The BOOKPRESS

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FREE

## FENTON'S WOODEN HORSE HOW THE ENGLISH PRAISE THE IRISH

Kevin Murphy

In the eighth circle of Dante's *Inferno* there is a specific habitat for practitioners of a certain type of fraud. In this *maleborge*, or evil pouch, Dante the pilgrim discovers Master Adam, the counterfeiter of Florentine gold coins, bickering with Sinon, the Greek who persuaded the Trojans to open their gates to the enormous wooden horse the Greeks had constructed as supposed tribute to the besieged town. It was a difficult job, since Sinon had first to persuade the Trojans that he had sincerely abandoned the Greek army. We all know what happened to the Trojans (we are now aphoristically warned to be wary of Greeks bearing gifts), and Dante, by placing Sinon in the outermost circle of fraud, gives him his due. But what can one make of a gift offered by the Professor of Poetry at Oxford to the Nobel Laureate of literature who, as it happens, was the previous occupant of his post?

A recent essay by James Fenton ("The Orpheus of Ulster" in *The New York Review of Books* July 11, 1996) sets out to review three recent Heaney publications: *The Redress of Poetry*, the lectures Heaney gave when he was Professor of Poetry at Oxford; *Crediting Poetry*, the lecture he gave upon receipt of the Nobel prize; and *The Spirit Level*, Heaney's most recent volume of poems. The issues Fenton focuses on, however, have little to do with Heaney the poet. Instead, Fenton the Englishman takes it upon himself to defend, of all things, the Irishness of Seamus Heaney and Heaney's rightful place in the shifting hierarchical sands of contemporary British poetry.

see *Fenton's Wooden Horse* page 8



Jack Sherman

INSIDE

"Heaney's Balancing Act," by John Bowers, page 6

# Problems and Pleasures at N.Y. Art Exhibitions

**Africa, The Art Of A Continent**  
Solomon Guggenheim Museum, N.Y.C.  
Through September 29, 1996

**Winslow Homer "Blazing Whites And Other Wonders"**  
Through September 22, 1996  
The Metropolitan Museum Of Art

## Nancy Neaher Maas

His arm raised, gripping an iron spear, a formidable image is poised for deadly action. Sheathed in a forest of nails, his body literally bristles as his whitened countenance tenses for battle. This startling figure resides at the Guggenheim this summer, safely encased in glass; he goes by the name *nkondi*. Originating among the Kongo of present-day Zaire, *nkondi* served as treasured agents of action, producing desired results ranging from the healing of physical and emotional problems, to military success and conflict resolution. With repeated use, figures such as this one gained formidable reputations for efficacy. If it was formerly admired for its utility, *nkondi* now receives the appreciative glances of Americans purely enchanted with its form.

Along with one hundred other sculptures and objects, the Kongo *nkondi* stands guard at this summer's unfolding of "Africa, Art of a Continent." He joins a heterogeneous army arrayed along the ever-ascending spiral of the museum's main exhibition hall, which—like mute sentinels—bears witness to the diversity, ingenuity and enigma of Africa's artistic heritage. Although this show constitutes a first for the Guggenheim, it arrives long after other important venues of art have focused exclusively on Africa. *Nkondi* and his ilk have graced the halls of American galleries and museums for decades, so now that the Guggenheim has finally joined the crowd, is the effort worth it? Is this show innovative, does it enhance the story told, or is it merely the tardy expression of a sleepy-eyed institution's belated discovery that Africa has Art? The "face" of the exhibition speaks for itself: this is a well-meaning effort, but one which falls far short of its aggressive claim as "revolutionary."

### THE SHOW

"Africa: The Art of a Continent" originated at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, the showcase of Great Britain's year-long celebration of lands which, in some cases, it formerly colonized. A slightly downsized version arrived in New York in June, complete, nonetheless, with a phalanx of sponsors (among them Time Warner, American Express, and UNESCO), an international cast of honorary patrons and donors (including Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Nelson Mandela) and a Harvard-accented in-house catalogue. With all the accompanying media attention, this show was marked as one to be reckoned with—an aspiring Jurassic Park at the art world box office. In "celebrating the

extraordinary contribution of the African continent to the world's visual culture," the organizers designed what they believed to be a "revolutionary" production—the "first major art exhibition ever to present Africa as an entity unbroken by the Sahara." This, in essence, is the Guggenheim's claim to fame.

Accordingly, the art of ancient peoples, the Egyptians and Nubians, pastoralists of East and South Africa, and Islamicized traditions unfold along the spiraling main gallery, together with art from the savannas and forests of West and Central Africa. The offerings are diverse, including visual and plastic arts made for disparate purposes over an extended time frame. If geography is the central determinant in the display, it is nonetheless a fairly loose imperative, as the arts of various constellations of peoples intermingle, transcending rigid chronologies.

Prehistoric art coexists with San ("Bushman") rock paintings created in the last two to three hundred years. West African wood sculptures—in which the actual object is usually no more than 75 years old—appear side-by-side with metalworking traditions dating back a thousand years. Elegant, virtually realistic royal busts from the forests of Ife, Nigeria make a vivid counter-statement to the highly stylized, almost cubistic masks of the Bamana and other groups living in the savanna of West Africa. Visually evocative traditions of different peoples are frequently shown as a unit, such as the headrests and slender staffs of the Shona and Zulu-related peoples, which delight the eye with their calligraphy of form. Sometimes shared functional concepts determine the placement of objects; a cluster of West African "ancestral" figures are displayed together, despite differences in origin and style. Other displays hint at historic relationships. Selections from Nubia in stone, glass, and other media reflect the impact of exchanges with ancient Egypt. Reciprocally, an enormous wood drum, characteristic of Sudanese chiefly prerogatives, clearly echoes a genre found throughout Sub-Saharan Africa in which an elementally simple bovine figure sports the signature of Islam—incised geometric designs framing a scimitar—on its massive flanks. In all cases, informational labels are sketchy; one would have to purchase an expensive catalogue (\$70 for the London original, \$30 for the Guggenheim publication in paperback) to educate oneself about the cultural context of a given work of art.

Not surprisingly, the real thrust of "Africa: Art of a Continent" is aesthetic. This is an Art show, designed to give full play to the visual excitement of Africa's traditional arts. For the most part, viewers will enjoy the experience of seeing some exceedingly striking works of art, a number of which have not been previously available to the American public. Especially strong are emissaries from East Africa—such as the Makonde and other Tanzanian sculpture—selected items from the Cameroon, and isolated sculptures like the marvelous "swordfish" mask from the Bissagos Islands, off the Guinea-Bissau coast. In contrast to previous

mainstream American exhibitions, where American audiences are used to being almost overwhelmed by the richness of Nigerian traditions, especially Yoruba arts and the royal traditions of Benin, this time the West African presence is modest. Nevertheless, some widely-acknowledged masterpieces from other areas of sub-Saharan Africa occupy center stage. Central Africa is particularly well-represented, notably the astonishingly dynamic hero figure of the Chokwe, the diminutive "twins" of a Luba headrest (which is too easy to overlook in its current space), and the inimitable Kongo *nkondi*.

Some unexpected inconsistencies mar the visual impact of the show. While the preponderance of objects exhibited are of world-class caliber, some are of lesser quality. For example, with the exception of one remarkable seated figure, the Tada bronzes of Nigeria should not have been included. Although these objects are highly important for historical and technical reasons, their awkward forms merely confuse an honest attempt to understand them as works of art. Tellingly, they go virtually unreported in the Guggenheim's catalogue, as do several of the ancient objects that may attest to the antiquity of Africa's art but not to its aesthetic import.

By subtitled "Africa: The Art of a Continent," a "revolutionary" first, its organizers demean their effort by casting it in an unduly competitive light. On the one hand, the public is introduced to a broad, visual survey of the art of continental Africa. This overview accords with customary Western curatorial approaches whereby aesthetic contemplation supersedes any other means—such as intellectual—of knowing works of art. In doing so, it is possible that the organizers gain victory on a technicality. This *may be* the first major Art exhibition on a grand scale to be geographically comprehensive.

Nonetheless, one must acknowledge the contribution of multitudes of other, more discrete shows which have also been genuinely inclusive in their approach to Africa. Themes encompassing East/South, Islamic and North Africa—as well as West and Central African staples—have been featured in numerous venues for several decades. Moreover, in addition to showcasing works of art, these earlier shows went to great lengths to educate the public by explaining the conceptual principles underlying various African traditions. The Guggenheim has profited from such pioneering efforts, freeing it from the burden of providing detailed cultural material and allowing it to concentrate instead on this collection as Art.

Granted, the art establishment is always predisposed to accentuate the visual, but this tendency is particularly strong when it comes to Africa, thanks to Picasso and other 20th-century modernists who fell in love with the formal innovations of African figurative sculpture earlier in this century. Still, the organizers at the Guggenheim might have taken note of earlier ecumenical treatments of African art. Off their radar screen entirely are the decades of anthro-

pologically-driven shows—broad cultural and artistic surveys of continental Africa—in our major museums. Were the organizing powers so uncertain of the public's reception of African art that they felt they had to find some sort of blockbuster hook to ensure an audience? Do they really like African art themselves?

But what is most astonishing is the show's thunderous omission of Africa's modern arts. Apparently, the continent's contemporary artists have no place in this temple designed to encourage the contemplation of visual and plastic arts. There is a deep irony in the fact that items created for specifically functional ends would be acceptable to the Guggenheim, but not recent creativity aimed directly at the aesthetic experience, despite the fact that many of Africa's sculptors, ceramicists, and painters have received international recognition for their efforts. Some might argue that no show can do everything. Yet, for an institution renowned for its dedication to contemporary art to excise Africa's implies that "traditional arts" rank as Art, but modern developments don't make the cut. Such fallacious judgments reveal more about the provinciality and short-sighted elitism of elements of the art establishment than they do about the reality of African Art.

To be entirely fair to the Guggenheim, a separate gallery on a lower level features a selection of African photography. In contrast to the atmosphere of timeless, abstract, purity which pervades the main exhibition hall, these images project a loud, bold Africa, full of life and conflict. The almost surreal portraits of Seydou Keita, or the politically charged images of apartheid South Africa highlight the grandest dimension of African Art: its inseparability from the life of the human community. Thus, although the hundred or so sculptures and other objects arranged along the museum's main corridor conform to Western notions of sophisticated Art, the visceral dynamism of African aesthetic traditions reveals itself in full force to the visitor who wanders off the main path.

The large crowds filling the Guggenheim's galleries indicate that the American public is ready for African art. A warm receptiveness pervades the air, even as visitors eye the daunting journey before them. Over recent years, the significance of these traditions has become widely accepted by the museum-going public. Curiosity, even initial discomfort, has given way to open tolerance and enthusiasm. Decades of education and enlightenment at the hands of dedicated museums, galleries and the schools are paying off. Therefore, it is too bad that "Africa: The Art of a Continent" underestimates its audience. The public welcomes African art in all its various guises, inflated hyperbole notwithstanding.

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This year New Yorkers suffering in the summer heat got a real break. All they had to do was visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art for some fresh breezes, glorious sunshine, and vivid blue waters. On display was the first comprehensive survey in two decades of the paintings of Winslow Homer—exhilarating Maine coast-

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lines, the dark forests and lakes of New York's Adirondacks, and the turquoise seas of the Caribbean. That's not to say that Homer was merely a purveyor of pretty pictures, pleurably absorbed and then forgotten. Far from it. Winslow Homer's appealing genre paintings, land- and seascapes reflect a uniquely American genius, giving New Yorkers and everyone else a perfect reason to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

After perusing the approximately 100 oils, watercolors, and occasional sketches and prints featured in a dozen of the Met's galleries, one can only come to the inescapable conclusion that 19th-century America was fortunate to have a first-class talent born as one of its own. Serendipity has its rewards, as Homer chose for subject matter aspects of rural and middle-class life, as well as the North American landscape. His imagery embraces scenes of the Civil War, children at play, farmers at work, danger and heroism on the high seas, and hunting and fishing in the backwoods. In the course of his career, Homer's interpretations increasingly played down the centrality of human presence—opting instead for a view of "man in nature" which maximizes the awe of the latter and the insignificance of the former. The choices do not, in the main, exceed the boundaries of Homer's predecessors or contemporaries. Precedents existed for each of the directions his brush took him, from the sweeping landscapes of the American luminists, to long-standing European fascination with the everyday activities of ordinary life, most widely appreciated in the art of the Impressionists. But Homer proved to be an independent soul who was consciously uninfluenced by the traditions and techniques of his predecessors, whether American or European. Still, he, too, was very much in step with his time, and his natural instincts appealed greatly to his contemporaries, explaining the success he enjoyed in his own lifetime.

To this day, a number of Homer's works—most notably his seascapes—endure as visual icons, so embedded in the public's psyche that every successive attempt to picture these natural phenomena must come to terms with them first. His raging seas, his "Eight Bells", as well as his gentler depictions of children's play epitomized in "Snap the Whip" (1872), have become part of the visual folklore of this nation, contributing to the repertoire of thoughts, words and images which help to define an American identity. The public at large may not necessarily recognize the name "Winslow Homer," but they know his work.

One has to get beyond the strong appeal of Homer's subject matter to fully comprehend the uniqueness of his contribution to American painting. On the one hand, if his renderings of daily life and the American wilderness diverged only subtly from the efforts of other painters, so Homer's style—for all but the last decade or two of his life—reveals incremental shifts from the painting of his time, rather than radical departure. Some might even label his work conservative. In contrast to the explosion of experimental movements which caught fire in Europe in the latter half of the 19th century—beginning with Impressionism and moving forward through Post-Impressionism and beyond—Homer worked in deliberate fashion; his hand recorded the perceptual world around him, consciously relinquishing little to his inner imagination or to radical experiments in technique. He was led by what he saw, not by an inner eye fed by an over-heated imagination. No doubt the realism of his imagery explains, in part, his popularity.

Little guessing is involved in determining the meaning of "Prisoners from the Front" (1866) or "The Two Guides" (1875). Devoid of flamboyant sentimentality or overwrought detail, Homer's message is direct and unadorned. It has been suggested that some of his paintings are statements of protest, such as his series of watercolors documenting deer hunting practices in the northern woods of the early 1890's. Yet this assessment is more likely based on our own environmental sensitivities rather than Homer's, who was known to thoroughly enjoy the hunt. That is not to imply that Homer's art lacked emotion. It is obvious that Nature filled

the artist with feelings of awe and sensuous delight. Whenever people populate his paintings, Homer consistently portrays them with dignity and respect. His soldiers, farmers, hunters, fishermen, his children, young women, and his African Americans all convey a nobility shared by Nature itself.

What, then, makes Homer unique? Part of the answer lies in "the details," having to do with zestful embellishments which give Homer's painting a verve and pizzazz lacking in the more conventional efforts of the time. Aside from his formidable draftsmanship—pencil sketches reveal his enviable talent—Homer's sophisticated compositional skills, his mastery of color nuances, and his clever renditions of light converge to create arresting images which excite the eye even today. While Japanese prints are believed to have had some influence on Homer, they do not by any means fully account for his lifelong preoccupation with effective visual balance.

The "Sharpshooter" (1866), one of his earliest canvases, is a case in point. What better way to structure this painting, isolating and angling the marksman above the viewer? So simple and so effective. Or, take "Crossing the Pasture" (1872) with the two farm boys looking out beyond the picture frame. (Whether or not the bovine in the background is a bull is not absolutely clear to this writer; some claim it is to explain the boys' apparent wariness. They could also be said to lack expression.) The boys dominate the foreground just slightly off-center, and economical curves shape the field and low mountains beyond. As is typical of Homer's landscapes, details are relatively minimal—a few deft flourishes in the foreground to indicate wildflowers and grass; a flash of white to suggest the side of a building catching sunlight. Homer was a colorist as well, emphasizing a limited palette—in this case, muted hues of green and siennas, set off with the dramatic white of the little boy's shirt. Throughout the body of his work, subtle variations on complementary colors—in infinite gradations of temperature, opacity and translucence—work together to create a coherent whole.

All of these strands find ultimate realization in Homer's greatest achievement: his capture of light effects. Although Homer remained within the bounds of the kind of classic realism deliberately abandoned by the French Impressionists and others seeking to accurately express the play of light across form and color, he made up for his conservatism by producing striking images which literally sparkle with light. For example, there is no mistaking the impact of daylight in "Crossing the Pasture" which captures the very moment when a bright summer sun is partially obscured by cumulus clouds. In other paintings, such as the oil "Eight Bells" (1886), Homer catches the moment when sun begins to break through after a storm at sea. Virtually every canvas contains a dramatic shock of white, accompanied by appropriate color nuances and shadow. These devices clearly reflect Homer's special genius for handling light, an acknowledged subplot in the painting of his generation.

If the oil medium was mastered to the point of brilliance by Homer, it is his watercolors which truly account for his recognition as a great American artist. Homer's style in oil pigments maintains a fairly even maturity across the course of his career, but his handling of watercolor tells another story. Here we can follow with absolute clarity Homer's evolution from a respected illustrator to a truly innovative genius. As a result of his working experience as an illustrator, Homer's beginning efforts in the medium adhere to a realistic rendering of form, with substantial detail and predictable, low-key color. Figures are fully detailed and even outlined, sometimes appearing too studied and stilted.

It was much later, with his soaringly spontaneous evocations of North American woods or Caribbean seas, that Homer pushed watercolor to new heights, exploiting the medium's ability to capture the quick study with freshness and light effects impossible in oil. Here Homer simplifies composition to essentials, whips in crystalline colors of complementary value with one swoop, and exploits white-as-light to the maximum. Whether it be the classic "Blue

Boat" (1892), picturing two canoeists in the Adirondacks, or his Bermuda landscape "Salt Kettle" (1899), stark white, balanced by luscious variations on blue or warm reds or pinks, elevate these works to the rarefied status of great art. Homer's whites are not only achieved by leaving watercolor paper unpainted. He lends a hand to every artist aspiring to master this unforgiving medium—where once color is laid down it is extremely difficult to alter—by leaving corrective marks of his own. One can note opaque gouache whites subtly overriding a color brush stroke. Elsewhere, more assertive gouging out or stippling of the paper's surface with a razor's edge can be detected. In one of Homer's large watercolors, completed in Cullercoats, England, he resorted to scraping out an entire background, leaving the dramatic study "Mending the Nets" (1882) which radiates with an intense warm light.

Homer's increasingly fluid and expressive approach brought him to the frontiers of experimentation in watercolor. With perhaps the exception of J.M.W. Turner, watercolor was a medium confined—usually carefully—to rendering subjects in nature on a modest scale. Its history is one of restraint and control. Despite the fact that water-driven pigments are, by nature, unruly and unpredictable, earlier practitioners steered clear of excess, not only in terms of technique, but also subject matter. Watercolor became a "proper" medium where danger was skirted by coloring detailed sketches with pallid layers of translucent paint.

Then Homer literally opened the floodgates and let the medium loose. In his later work, bold layers of strong color define shapes, sometimes dispensing with former techniques of over-painting or glazing. Detail becomes scanty; a daub here and there suffice to indicate foreground foliage. A forested backdrop is suggested by a simple shape of dark blue, complete with watery "blooms," the finicky painter's anathema. Increasingly, Homer's images approach the border between realism and abstraction, as sensuous color and strong shape begin to take on an identity unto themselves. "Fishing the Rapids, Saguenay" and "The Coming Storm", both painted in 1902, almost reach that point as identifiable shape and color nearly dissolve into pure abstraction.

Homer's experience with watercolor seemed to exert an influence on his last efforts at oil as well. Admittedly, the artist moved in reciprocal fashion between the two media for the duration of his career. Many a time, preliminary sketches and watercolors established themes also executed in oil. Stylistically, too, techniques like Homer's signature flourish of white pervaded his approach to both media. Yet, the utter simplification of his coastal Maine sea series of the 1890's evokes the direct force and drama of Homer's late watercolors, as he pares down the imagery to elementals, relying on almost abstract swathes of color—and white—to convey a timeless narrative of nature's shifting temperaments.

If Homer can be said to have a fault, it would be his treatment of the human figure. While his 1870's feminine subjects are lovely to behold, at other times his figures lack natural grace and are a bit stiff in pose. Occasionally, figures are disproportionately small-headed (to wit: the child in the white shirt in "Crossing the Pasture"). While some of the English fisherwomen are marvelously persuasive in all their volume and rounded mass, the monumental efforts Homer expended on "masterworks" like "Undertow" (1886) betray an anxious hand and eye, resulting in an awkward grouping that compromises the painting's serious intent. Fortunately, in his late watercolors—as well as selected oils—Homer succeeds in suggesting human subjects with the deft skill that typifies his magnificent images of Nature. Thus, "The Adirondack Guide" (1894) is one with its context, as is the Bahamian "The Sponge Diver" (1898-99). If Nature was Homer's supreme subject, by the end of his admirable career he came to include the human presence as gracefully as one could ask.

*Nancy Neaher Maas is an artist and an art historian. She teaches at SUNY Cortland.*

## The Long Silence

*I remember now  
The long silence  
Of a single word  
In a forest  
Of words  
When you stood frozen  
Against a mesh of iron  
A spidery wall  
And no one heard  
Your silence which was  
The silence of Spring  
Of time passing*

*What was I?—  
A rock  
The sky  
Turning over the forest  
Consuming it  
With night  
And all the spiders  
Slept standing  
Upon the chests  
Of brittle children  
And burning adults*

*These were the coldest nights  
I remember  
Huddling close  
To my mother's skeleton  
Closing her hand  
Upon a crumbling photograph  
Some winged remembrance*

*Ashes of memory  
Floated over the camp  
Invisible as dreams  
As faces  
In that long night*

*I lay down too  
Closing my eyes  
Upon winter  
Her ghostly hard of silence  
Her unimaginable truth.*

## Writers Dream

*Celestial ruins  
Of trees  
Shadows and  
Drifting words  
In icy wind  
Broken figures  
Of speech  
Overestimating  
The whiteness*

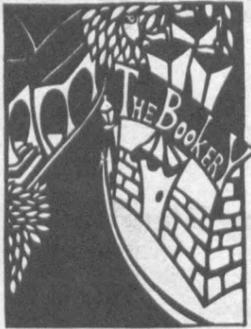
*I could write  
These things—*

*The arched dead leaves  
Stretching bones  
Of bark  
Rising up  
Like quills  
In the theoretical  
Dark*

*Sculpting  
Finite forms*

*Diminishing  
The silence.*

—Francesca Breton



Off Campus

## At The Bookery

This presentation is part of our ongoing series of readings and talks upstairs in the DeWitt Mall.

Sunday, September 8, 4:00 p.m.



**Irene Villar,**

granddaughter of a Puerto Rican nationalist who opened fire on the United States House of Representatives in 1954, will read from *A Message From God in the Atomic Age*, a razor sharp memoir about the allure of suicide for three generations of women in one Puerto Rican family.

Sunday, September 15, 4:00 p.m.

**Zillah Eisenstein,**

Professor of Politics at Ithaca College, and a feminist activist for over twenty years, will discuss her book, *Hatreds: Racialized and Sexualized Conflicts in the 21st Century*. Professor Eisenstein's examination begins with the body and ends with the globe, travelling between theory and the sites of everyday politics, while constructing a passionate narrative about the horrors of hatred in today's world.

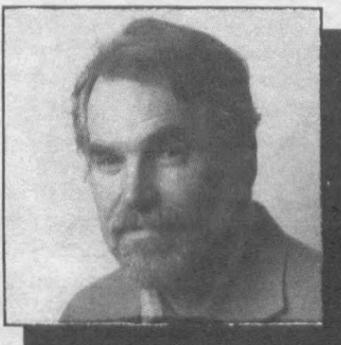
Sunday, September 29, 4:00 p.m.



**A. Manette Ansay,**

graduate of Cornell's MFA program and Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Vanderbilt University, will read selections from *Sister*, the moving story of a girl raised in a rural Catholic community. Haunted by her younger brother's disappearance, she struggles to reconcile her own life with the wishes of her family and the church.

Sunday, October 6, 4:00 p.m.



**Edward Hower,**

author of the critically acclaimed novels, *Wolf Tickets* and *The New Life Hotel*, will read from his newly published novel of adult passions and youthful rebellion, *Night Train Blues*. A resident of Ithaca, Edward Hower gives us a story which rings with authenticity, compassion, forgiveness, and, in the end, makes us all a little bit wiser.

Sunday, October 13, 4:00 p.m.

**Bryna and Harvey Fireside,**

long time Ithaca community activists, and organizers of the local chapter of Amnesty International, will discuss their new book *Young People from Bosnia Talk About War*. This moving memoir is based on interviews with 25 students who recounted their stories of survival during three years of ethnic conflict.

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# Mishima's Final Draft

Mark Seinfelt

His death was his crowning achievement. He staged his ritual suicide as if it were the denouement of his last play, the final chapter of a novel, or the concluding line of some ultimate poem. Blood would have to flow, and it would have to flow in copious quantities, for Yukio Mishima to realize his youthful desire to make his life a work of art. His name itself was a fabrication—he was born Kimitake Hiraoka. He selected it for himself at the age of sixteen when his first story, "The Forest in Full Bloom", was accepted for publication. He crafted his public persona with the same diligence as he conceived and designed his novels. He would be Japan's Renaissance man, her Leonardo da Vinci. The death he chose for himself would have the greatest possible political impact, but would also serve to underscore the philosophy he developed in his fiction. According to the aesthetic he professed, a metaphysics of love and death entwined, the successful art work would necessarily end in an apotheosis of violence. In an interview shortly before his suicide, when asked why he glorified ruthlessness and savagery in his fiction, Mishima answered that, "This blood and brutality is something we have stylized into a special sense of beauty. It comes from our subconscious. We have always had a special symbolism about blood."

Mishima believed that the beautiful object attained the highest measure of perfection at the moment of its destruction. Again and again in his numerous novels, short stories and plays, the action inexorably progresses to an act of immolation. Something stunning and gorgeous—an art object or a living person—must be annihilated, obliterated. Sometimes, the destructive act remains a fantasy in the mind of a character, as in the final scene of the early novel *Confessions of a Mask*. The autobiographical narrator discovers homoerotic yearnings within himself as he watches a robust and vibrant youth dancing in a café, and suddenly visualizes the young man's chest bleeding and covered with wounds. More often than not, the deed is carried out in fact. In *Thirst For Love*, the central figure, the young widow Etsuko, strikes down a servant boy for whom she has developed an unquenchable passion with a mattock snatched from the hands of her repulsive father-in-law, who has forced her to be his mistress. In *The Temple of The Golden Pavilion*, the failed Buddhist monk Mizoguchi sets fire to the famous temple in Kyoto whose beauty has haunted and obsessed him ever since he entered the sect as a boy-novice.

In contrast to Mizoguchi's act of destruction, which is carefully conceived and planned to the last detail, Etsuko's crime seems a sudden insane impulse. Yet, in both cases, the deed is foreshadowed by smaller destructive acts. Prior to the murder, Etsuko attempts to inflict both physical and psychological pain on the object of her desire. The destruction of the Golden Temple, on the other hand, is prefigured by an incident in Mizoguchi's youth. As a schoolboy, he deliberately disfigures the ivory scabbard of a soldier's sword. Upon entering the temple as an acolyte, Mizoguchi comes under the spell of the building, one of the great national treasures of Japan. He feels overpowered by the pavilion's great beauty, and almost immediately desires deliverance from the spell that the edifice casts on him. During the war years, he fervently hopes that American planes will bomb the shrine. When the war ends, and the temple remains intact, Mizoguchi embarks on a course of calculated duplicity and wrongdoing that step by step leads to his last outrageous deed. At one point, he accepts cigarettes from an American soldier for trampling on the belly of a pregnant prostitute in the temple garden, causing her to miscarry. He then gives the cigarettes to the superior of the temple, implicating him in Mizoguchi's crime. Later, he spends funds set aside by the temple for his tuition at the Buddhist University at a Kyoto brothel, hoping to bring the wrath of the superior down on his head. But this attempt to effect his dismissal fails, and Mizoguchi decides that liberation will come only when the temple is engulfed in



Photo by Tamotsu Yato

Yukio Mishima

flames.

Both Etsuko and Mizoguchi seem to embody aspects of Mishima's character, and their final destructive deeds surely prefigure the author's own death. To many Japanese, Mishima's suicide seemed an irrational, insane act. When informed of Mishima's death, Japan's Prime Minister Eisaku Sato stated to the press that the celebrated novelist "was out of his mind." If, however, one examines the author's biography and reads his work, the manner in which he chose to end his life hardly seems surprising. In retrospect, suicide appears to have been inevitable. Moreover, it quickly becomes evident that Yukio Mishima planned his death with all the care and deliberation of a Mizoguchi.

On November 25, 1970, the author paid a visit to the headquarters of Japan's Eastern Ground Self-Defense Forces at the military complex on Ichigaya hill near Tokyo. The military authorities received him graciously. He had made an appointment to visit the facility in advance, and was accompanied by four members of the Tatenokai, or Shield, Society, an organization of young men, mostly university students, Mishima had founded in 1968 for the express purpose of putting samurai teachings into practice on weekend retreats. The recruits were all personally selected by the author. He even designed the brown uniforms they proudly wore. The young men professed an interest in martial arts, but also shared Mishima's right-wing political leanings, wishing to restore Emperor worship in Japan. Thanks to Mishima's literary reputation, a number of high-ranking Japanese military officers were persuaded to support the organization, and members of the society routinely took part in military exercises along with regular soldiers.

In 1970, Mishima was at the height of his fame. Although he was only forty-five years old, he had been nominated for the Nobel Prize on three occasions. He had distinguished himself in a wide variety of genres, having written a dozen novels, more than fifty short stories, many successful plays, both modern and traditional (No and Kabuki), a travel book, and countless essays. His talent, however, was not restricted to his literary endeavors. He acted, directed, and produced for the theater, and appeared in several motion pictures: in one film he enacted harikari and, in another, starred as a gangster.

Mishima had been a weak and sickly child, but he developed into a superb athlete. In 1955, he began a much-promoted regimen of weightlifting and body-building. In the spirit of the samurai warriors, he trained himself to be an expert swordsman, and he became adept at kendo, the ancient sport of stick-fighting. He also mastered several other martial arts forms, and earned a reputation as an amateur boxer. Photographs of Mishima participating in various sporting events regularly appeared in Japanese periodicals.

In short, Yukio Mishima had long been a figure of national prominence. Not only was he a writer of world renown, in Japan he had the status and celebrity of an American film star. In an interview, when asked who he felt was the greatest writer of the twentieth century, he replied Thomas Mann, but that if he could assume the identity of any person on the planet, he would

not choose to be Mann, or himself, or indeed any other writer—he would choose to be Elvis Presley.

Born in Tokyo on January 14, 1925 into an upper-middle class family, Mishima was raised in traditional—if also somewhat peculiar—fashion. Asserting her prerogative, his paternal grandmother demanded that she be entrusted with raising the delicate sickly infant, and, over the protest of the child's mother, Mishima was turned over to her. For the next twelve years, she brought the boy up and indulged him in everything. He was frequently ill, but also was prone to feigning sickness. Mishima later claimed that his grandmother raised and dressed him as if he were a girl. Only when he visited relatives did he have to act like a boy. "The reluctant masquerade had begun," Mishima wrote.

After his grandmother's death, Mishima moved into his parents home. At about the same time, he was accepted into the prestigious Peers' School, where he performed brilliantly and made his first attempts at writing. He was sixteen when he was first published, and when he graduated, in 1944, he received a citation from the Emperor for being the school's most outstanding honor student. While attending classes, Mishima was attracted to a muscular upper-classman named Omi. "Because of him," he later wrote, "I began to love strength, an impression of overflowing blood, ignorance, rough gestures, careless speech, and savage melancholy inherent in flesh not tainted in any way with intellect."

When the Second World War broke out, Mishima was still a student at the Peers' school. He had already begun publishing stories and poems on a regular basis. He claimed that he did not enlist in the Japanese army due to his poor constitution and chronic illness. However, after his graduation he was drafted. By that time, the war was already lost, but the army was nonetheless preparing to resist the anticipated American invasion. Mishima would later write in an essay that he "shuddered with a strange delight at the thought of my own death. I felt as if I owned the whole world." Later he professed that he wanted to die in combat. However, he did not pass the final physical and was rejected for service at the last possible moment. After the war, at his father's behest, he attended the Tokyo Imperial University of Jurisprudence, from which he graduated in 1947. He then accepted a position at the Ministry of Finance. Shortly thereafter, he became the protégé of Yasunari Kawabata, who encouraged him to write his first novel. Mishima resigned his post and devoted himself to his literary pursuits. *Confessions of a Mask* was published the following year.

Throughout his career, Mishima delighted in shocking the public. The poses he assumed were often conflicting and paradoxical. Mishima's critics claimed he was a crypto-fascist, but he vigorously denied the charge. Though he championed the traditional samurai spirit, he claimed that this was not the same as the militarism that had brought Japan into the Second World War. In Mishima's view, it was the abandonment of the old code during Japan's period of industrialization and modernization in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that paved the way for his country's defeat. Thus, Mishima felt, it was Japan's "Westernized, civilized army, which was so close to Fascism and Nazism." Yet despite his reverence for his country's samurai heritage, Mishima adopted a Western manner of living which astounded and dismayed his associates. He told the press that his ideal was "to live in a house where I sit on a rococo chair wearing an aloha shirt and blue jeans." The house he built in Tokyo was far from traditional, being Western in style and furnished with Victorian bric-a-brac.

Although he had been a practicing homosexual since adolescence, in 1958, informed that his mother had terminal cancer, Mishima acceded to his family's wishes and entered into an arranged marriage with Yoko Sugiyama. He took an active part in the upbringing of their two children, and proved to be a courteous and solicitous husband. Flaunting Japanese custom, he permitted Yoko to travel abroad with him, and granted her many non-traditional liberties in their daily life. All the while, Mishima contin-

ued to frequent the gay bars in Tokyo's Ginza district, and at the time of his death was infatuated with Masakatsu Morita, the first student to join the Shield Society and his primary accomplice in his last deed.

To the end, Mishima continued to produce such best-selling novelettes such as *After the Banquet* and *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace with the Sea*. During this final period, he increasingly devoted himself to the composition of what would prove to be his masterpiece, a tetralogy of novels known as *The Sea Of Fertility*, in which Mishima explored the subject of reincarnation. Every volume featured a different hero or heroine, each an incarnation of the same soul. Three of the books—*Spring Snow*, *Runaway Horses*, and *The Temple of Dawn*—had been published by 1970. Mishima finished the last book, *The Decay of the Angel*, just prior to visiting the headquarters of the Self-Defense Forces. He placed the completed manuscript on the vestibule table of his home when he left to join the four students on the morning of November 25. He had prepared what would happen next as carefully as his fictional character Mizoguchi had planned the destruction of the Golden Temple. His life and work would come to a conclusion on the same day.

When Mishima and the four students arrived at the Ichigaya complex, they asked for an interview with the commanding officer, Lieut. General Kanetoshi Mashida. He invited them into his office, where he and Mishima spoke for approximately a half hour. At the conclusion of their conversation, Mishima drew his sword and the four students jumped the general, taking him hostage and quickly tying him to his chair. The noise of the struggle caught the attention of staff aides outside the office. Sensing that something was wrong, these men attempted to storm the room. However, by that time, the general was already securely bound, and the students had joined Mishima at the door to the office with samurai swords drawn. The besiegers were quickly repulsed. Six of the aides suffered stab wounds. Mishima demanded that he be given the opportunity to address the Self-Defense Forces at the base. By noon, a crowd of 1,200 soldiers had assembled below the balcony of the three-story white building. His hands on the railing, Mishima harangued the troops for approximately fifteen minutes. He urged the soldiers to foment revolution in order to overturn Japan's post-war constitution, which forbade war, and to restore the rule of the Emperor. He said the Self-Defense Forces had failed to achieve anything during their twenty years of existence, and accused its leaders of being spineless. It was up to the servicemen themselves, Mishima said, to restore honor to their country. The reception he received was chilly. The servicemen shouted for him to surrender and to release his hostage. "We can't act in common with fellows like you," one man shouted. Mishima gave three shouts of "Banzai" and went back inside. Upon returning to the general's office, he told the students, "They didn't seem to hear me too well," then sat down on the floor and bared his torso. With his knife, he committed hari-kari, suicide by disembowelment or belly cutting, formerly practiced by the samurai in cases of disgrace or by government order. His disciple Masakatsu Morita then performed the rite known as *Ksithaku*. He stood behind the dying Mishima and beheaded him with his sword. Morita then committed suicide in the same manner, one of the other students in turn severing his head from his shoulders. Still tied to his chair, and horrified by what he saw, General Mashida shouted, "Stop it!" and "What are you doing?" After the beheading of Morita, the three remaining students came out of the room, bringing Mashida with them. They surrendered quietly to the police. Undoubtedly, Mishima thought his suicide both beautiful and honorable. He had died as a martyr for a cause, believing that his death would cause a spiritual awakening among his people.

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## Digging a Hole

*I am digging a hole to plant a magnolia  
and thinking of the others digging in the forest  
outside Srebrenica. It's hard to dig  
a hole big enough for the roots of a tree  
let alone a body. "That's why the graves  
are shallow," said the forensic expert  
last night on the radio,"and the bodies skele-  
tized."  
You might as well say there are only bones  
I think, and wonder why they talk  
about remains when they mean bones.  
Under a picture in the Times it said:  
"A decomposed body can be seen in the fore-  
ground,"  
but I can only see a skull.  
"Can you definitely say they were not resisting  
when they were killed?" asks the interviewer;  
the forensic man answers with no trace of  
irony:  
"When their hands are tied behind their  
backs  
you can safely say they were not resisting."  
Half an hour, and I'm just two feet down.  
Eight thousand people disappeared at Sre-  
brenica.  
How many hours did it take to hide them?  
After a while I imagine the Serbs  
must have got tired and turned to the prisoners  
untied the hands of the ones not too weak  
from torture or old age and told them to dig.  
It's an old trick - Auschwitz, Mauthausen:  
Order the dying to dig their own graves.  
Many hands make light work.  
The easy part is filling the hole;  
it's already half full — you just add water  
then peat moss and spade by spade  
fill the gap you have made in the earth.  
The rest is done by the sun and the rain.*

—Gail Holst-Warhaft

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# Seamus Heaney's Balancing Act

John Bowers

## The Spirit Level

by Seamus Heaney  
Farrar, Straus, and Giroux  
92 pages, \$20 cloth

One of the cardinal rules of thumb of the early modernist period, repeated like a mantra in all contemporary writing handbooks, was the ruthless elimination of unnecessary descriptive adjectives. In general, adjectives were to be made use of only as a last resort, when no better means of expression was available. Verbs, it was felt, were cleaner and stronger, closer to direct action and clear thought—and therefore more modern—than adjectives. Seamus Heaney, in contrast, has never been averse to employing an adjective—even an unnecessary one—if it sounded good. But in this new volume, his first since winning the Nobel Prize, the modernist injunction is massively, even radically, violated. The poems in this volume are laden with descriptive adjectives—frequently with strings of them—as in the first three tercets of Section 1 of “To a Dutch Potter in Ireland”:

*The soils I knew ran dirty. River sand  
Was the one clean thing that stayed itself  
In that slabbery, clabbery, wintry, puddled  
ground.*

*Until I found Bann clay. Like wet daylight  
Or viscous satin under the felt and frieze  
Of humus layers. The true diatomite*

*Discovered in a little sucky hole,  
Grey-blue, dull-shining, scentless, touchable—  
Like the earth's old ointment box, sticky and cool.*

There are eighteen adjectives in these nine lines, an average of two per line. Indeed there is hardly a noun in this volume that isn't accompanied by at least one adjectival modifier, often by two, and not infrequently by a string of three or more. Heaney is particularly fond of compound adjectives and complex deverbal adjective phrases: *the held-at-arm's length dead, the wine-dark taste of home, sheer, bright-shining spring, silk-white ashes, cold-floored waiting-room; the hero.../stripped to the skin, blood-plastered, moaning/ and rocking, splashing, dozing off/ accommodated as if he were a stranger, my tongue/.../trampled and rattled, running piss and muck/all swimmy-trembling as the lick of fire, a wall-eyed, hard-baked seagull, that blind-from-birth, sweet-voiced, withdrawn musician; etc.* Or consider the characteristic opening stanzas of “Weighing In”:

*The 56 lb. weight. A solid iron  
Unit of negation. Stamped and cast  
With an inset, rung-thick, molded, short cross-  
bar*

*For a handle. Squared-off and harmless-looking  
Until you tried to lift it, then a socket-ripping,  
Life-betlittling force—*

with no less than eleven adjectives, half of them compound. This great outpouring of adjectival modifiers, combined with a marked partiality for compound nouns and extended nominal sequences (as in the six lines above, which contain only a single main verb, and that one in dependent clause), gives the verse a feel that is dense, lush, and exuberant—almost exotic—yet at the same time oddly static, as huge nominal chunks are plunked down like concrete objects and left to float in delicate equilibrium around a few modest, hardworking verbs.

This heavy drift toward the nominal is by no means unique to Heaney's writing: it is in fact a general feature of contemporary writing that has been developing for some time, not only in poetry but in prose as well. What is surprising is the extreme to which he takes the technique. There are entire poems in this volume that have barely a complete sentence in them, in which all the action takes place in adjectives, extended adjectival modifiers, and prepositional phrase complements piled up like defensive bulwarks around the nouns.

What is the purpose of this style? What kind of a poetics does it encode? It seems to me that a syntax of this sort is particularly conducive to a poetry dominated by description, elegy and memory. It is a timeless poetry, a form of pastoral, in which balance and moderation take precedence over action and force. Each nominal chunk represents a timeless piece of description or an element of memory that has to be brought into balance with other such elements. It is a style that facilitates elegy rather than tragedy, balance rather than conflict, the discursive rather than the analytic. It is both airy and concrete, calmly arranging and rearranging realia in complete imaginative freedom. The biggest dangers of this style are a tendency toward inflated, empty rhetoric and a drift into nostalgia and sentiment. Avoiding these dangers requires a firm guiding hand and an exquisite sense of balance.

In the poem “Weighing In”, it looks at first as if Heaney intends to propose an explicit poetics of balance corresponding to his stylistic practice:

*Gravity's black box, the immovable  
Stamp and squat and square-root of dead weight.  
Yet balance it*

*Against another one placed on a weighbridge—  
On a well-adjusted, freshly greased weigh-  
bridge—  
And everything trembled, floated with give and  
take.*

But then, in the second part, he performs an abrupt volte-face, dismissing sardonically this pastoral vision of great forces in well-adjusted balance:

*And this is all the good tidings amount to:  
This principle of bearing, bearing up  
And bearing out, just having to*

*Balance the intolerable in others  
Against our own, having to abide  
Whatever we settled for and settled into*

*Against our better judgement. Passive  
Suffering makes the world go round.  
Peace on earth, men of good will, all that*

*Holds good only as long as the balance holds,  
The scales ride steady and the angels' strain  
Prolongs itself at an unearthly pitch.*

Pursuing this line of thought a step further, the third part of the poem argues vehemently against the Christian principle of turning the other cheek, concluding with the plea:

*Still, for Jesus' sake,  
Do me a favor, would you, just this once?  
Prophecy, give scandal, cast the stone.*

The fourth part begins by testily summing up the poem's argument as follows:

*Two sides to every question, yes, yes, yes...  
But every now and then, just weighing in  
Is what it must come down to, and without*

*Any exculpation or self-pity.*

But then, at the very end, the real reason for this revolt against moderation and balance is revealed: it seems that on some occasion, the details of which are left obscure, “when follow-through was called for/And a quick hit would have fairly rankled./.../I held back when I should have drawn blood/And that way (*mea culpa*) lost an edge.” The poem concludes with the line: *At this stage only foul play leans the slate.* In other words, the real subject of the poem is the poet's keen regret at having failed to lash out, to “cast the stone,” on some occasion when swift retaliation (“to refuse the other cheek”) would have been the appropriate response, rather than “a deep mistaken chivalry.”

So much for the explicit message. But now we must come to terms with the final irony that this poem, which argues eloquently against moderation and balance, in favor of an eye for

an eye and a tooth for a tooth, is itself a model of balance in its structure, consisting of four equal sections of four tercets each, written in impeccable iambic pentameter (with a few shorter lines thrown in for spice). In short, the structure of the poem embodies precisely that which it argues against. The resolution of this apparent contradiction can only lie in the fact that the purpose of the poem is not primarily to promote Old Testament morality, but rather, as indicated already, to express regret at having failed to react in that way on a particular occasion. Like most of the poems in this volume, “Weighing Up” is in the end elegiac and pastoral. The driving force behind most of them is description and evocation of the past. There are memories of childhood, of family and friends, of past events of particular personal significance; there is an effort to sum up, to celebrate. Despite the occasional intrusion of the darker side of human existence, most notably in the allusions to sectarian violence in Northern Ireland in the poems “The Flight Path” and “Keeping Going” and, more abstractly perhaps, in the long poem “Mycenae Lookout” (an account of the fall of Troy and its aftermath, told from the viewpoint of a sentry), the volume as a whole is positive rather than negative in its outlook, optimistic rather than pessimistic.

Seamus Heaney must surely be one of the most expert contemporary writers of “traditional” English verse. The poems in this volume are all written in regular iambic meters, the great majority being pentameter lines, with fairly heavy use of enjambment; they are generally arranged in more or less regular stanzas, often with symmetrical groupings of stanzas into larger structural units; and they display a formidable mastery of rhyme, half-rhyme, internal rhyme, alliteration, etc. His grasp of musicality in verse may well be unrivaled today. However, the awesome technical virtuosity displayed in these poems sometimes creates a dazzling surface that leaves me admiring, yet unmoved. The gorgeous and sensuous description does not always lead to revelation. Writing that on first glance seemed brilliant turns out on closer inspection to be rhetorical and overblown. Let me illustrate the nature of these qualms with a few concrete examples.

In a recent, rather uncritically laudatory review of this volume in *The New York Times Book Review*, Richard Tillinghast singles out the short poem “The Poplar” for praise, to illustrate his claim that “Mr. Heaney never merely describes.” The poem, he says, “records a moment of beauty—and questions what natural balance might have been upset to produce it”:

*Wind shakes the big poplar, quicksilvering  
The whole tree in a single sweep.  
What bright scale fell and left this needle quiver-  
ing?  
What loaded balances have come to grief?*

This is lovely writing. The image in the first two lines is beautiful. The third line too is very good, the image of a quivering needle on a scale corresponding nicely to the shaking poplar, while the brilliant half-rhyme *quicksilvering/quivering* mirrors the images perfectly. But the sentiment expressed in the final line, despite the elegant half-rhyme *sweep/grief*, is in my view a failure: it says both too much and too little. It says too much because it suggests in a portentous way that the shaking of the poplar is the result of some momentous event, some unnamed tragedy; it says too little because it fails to explain precisely why the image in the first two lines has the effect it does on the human spirit. Without further elaboration, the final line is simply too vague and too grandiose to match the delicacy and precision of the natural event it purports to explain. In short, it is mere rhetoric.

Consider next “The Butter-Print”, a poem reminiscent in its taut, well-constructed quatrains of the best of Heaney's earlier work:

*Who carved on the butter-print's round open  
face  
A cross-hatched head of rye, all jags and thistles?  
Why should soft butter bear that sharp device  
As if its breast were scored with slivered glass?*



Scott Werder

*When I was small I swallowed an awn of rye.  
My throat was like standing crop probed by a  
scythe.  
I felt the edge slide and the point stick deep  
Until, when I coughed and coughed and  
coughed it up,*

*My breathing came dawn-cold, so clear and sud-  
den  
I might have been inhaling airs from heaven  
Where healed and martyred Agatha stares down  
At the relic knife as I stared at the awn.*

Interestingly, James Fenton declared recently in *The New York Review of Books* that this poem “went straight into my personal anthology of the best of Heaney.” My view is quite different. The first stanza begins with a pair of rhetorical questions, both of which seem to me to come dangerously close to running aground on the shoals of the bathetic. Certainly one might wonder why a butter-print should bear the design of a head of rye, but what justifies, particularly in the opening line, personifying the surface of the butter-print as its “round, open face?” Still, suspending disbelief, we move on to the next two lines, which ask us why this sharp device should be used on soft butter, setting up a nice contrast between the sharp “jags and bristles” of the cross-hatched rye design and the smooth, soft surface of the butter to be marked with the butter-print. But surely it is poetic overkill to continue, as Heaney does, with the final line “as if its breast were scored with slivered glass.” What

justifies this personification and sexualization of the surface of the butter as its “breast,” or the implicit violence contained in the phrase “scored with slivered glass?” Furthermore, how does this fit with the earlier characterization of the butter-print’s “round open face?” Is the round open face of the butter-print meant to inflict this grievous wound on the soft butter’s breast? And if so, why? Is the innocent-looking butter-print a sadist, or sexual predator, in disguise? It strikes me that this entire stanza is a prime product of the intellectual function that Coleridge termed “fancy,” as opposed to “imagination.” The images are actually quite lurid and melodramatic; they don’t fit together to form an imaginative whole; and there is no context presented that could conceivably justify such hyperactive rhetoric.

The second stanza moves immediately, by pure association of ideas, to a straightforwardly description of a childhood memory of swallowing an awn of rye. Presumably, the pain and the panic induced by the sharp point of the rye awn is meant to justify retrospectively in some way the violence of the description of the design on the butter-print in the first stanza, but the imaginative connection between the two seems severely strained at best.

The awn finally having been coughed up, the final stanza is meant to produce a resolution of the various images and ideas introduced in the first two. Instead, an entirely new image is introduced, that of Saint Agatha—in heaven, no less—staring down at the relic knife that was used to martyr her, while the boy stares at the

awn he has just coughed up. Again, the transition between these images seems to be purely associative: “My breathing came dawn-cold, so clear and sudden/I might have been inhaling airs from heaven/Where healed and martyred Agatha...etc.” Presumably, the sharp point of the awn sticking in the boy’s throat corresponds to the relic knife that was used to kill Saint Agatha, while both in turn relate somehow to the rye design on the butter-print that scored the breast of the soft butter like slivered glass, thus setting up a deep correspondence between the boy with the awn stuck in his throat, the martyred Saint Agatha and the scored breast of the butter. At the risk of sounding like a latter-day Yvor Winters, I have to confess that all of this strikes me as nothing more than fanciful nonsense. The supposed analogies, when examined critically, make no imaginative sense whatsoever. Despite the undoubted competence of the writing on a purely technical level, the poem must ultimately be judged to consist of little more than inflated rhetoric.

The most successful poems in this volume are those that stick to a clear narrative line and resist the temptation to depart too far from naturalistic description. Poems such as “A Sofa in the Forties”, “A Call”, “The Errand”, and “Damon” recount in clear, evocative language memories of childhood, while poems such as “The Rain Stick” and “The Gravel Walks” exhibit Heaney’s undoubted phonetic gifts, used in the service of simple, sensuous description. An example of Heaney at his best is the second section of “Damon” in which he describes a bricklayer at work:

*Over and over, the slur, the scrape and mix  
As he trowelled and retrowelled and laid down  
Courses of glum mortar. Then the bricks  
Jiggled and settled, locked and lapped in line.  
I loved especially the trowel's shine,  
Its edge and apex always coming clean  
And brightening itself by mucking in.  
It looked light but felt heavy as a weapon,  
Yet when he lifted it there was no strain.  
It was all point and skim and float and glisten  
Until he washed and lapped it tight in sacking  
Like a cult blade that had to be kept hidden.*

This is scrupulous and exact, sensuous and elegant, and the final two lines delicately hint at deeper mysteries without bludgeoning the reader over the head with pompous rhetoric. In contrast, the first part of the poem, which begins well with the memory of a wound suffered by the bricklayer fifty years ago, ends as follows:

*Wound that I saw  
In glutinous color fifty years ago—  
Damon as omen, weird, a dream to read—  
Is weeping with the held-at-arm's-length dead  
From everywhere and nowhere, here and now.*

The last two lines seem to me to dissolve into pure melodrama. The description of the wound and its identification with “the damson stain/That steeped through his packed lunch” is effective enough on its own, while the supernatural overtones are conveyed simply and economically by the phrases “Damon as omen, weird, a dream to read—”. The final two lines, in which the wound is personified and described rather too historically as “weeping with the held-at-arm's-length dead/From everywhere and nowhere, here and now,” are unnecessary and unjustified.

Another poem that starts out strongly but ends in confusion is “Mint.” It begins straightforwardly, with a description of an unnoticed clump of mint in the back yard that “also spelled promise/And newness in the back yard of our life,” continues on into the third stanza with a memory of the mint being snipped with scissors on Sunday mornings, leading to the elegant conclusion: “My last things will be first things slipping from me.” Rather than ending here, however, Heaney attempts to resolve the poem as follows:

*Yet let all things go free that have survived.*

*Let the smells of mint go heady and defenceless*

*Like inmates liberated in that yard.  
Like the disregarded ones we turned against  
Because we'd failed them by our disregard.*

Once again, it seems to me that an unjustified leap has been taken, based on a dubious personification of the smells of mint that he would let “go heady and defenceless/Like inmates liberated in that yard.” From there it is only a step to a moral both sententious and confusing: “Like the disregarded ones we turned against/Because we'd failed them by our disregard.” Applied to human beings, there is a psychological insight in these final lines which, however, is simply not supported by the implied analogy with the overlooked mint plant in the back yard with which the poem began.

What these examples show, I think, is that Heaney tends to go off the rails when he abandons straightforward narrative or physical description and goes for grand conclusions, profound comparisons, or deep analogical connections. His strength does not lie in the abstract, and his forays into such territory tend to produce strained comparisons and overblown rhetoric rather than real poetic thought. In his earlier poetry, such tendencies were kept in check by stricter rhyme schemes and a sharp eye for naturalistic detail. In the best poetry of his middle period, the writing is firmly anchored in the short dimeter and trimeter lines that he developed as a formal analogue of the sharp physical details with which he etched his descriptions of the prehistoric past.

The writing in *The Spirit Level*, while freer and more open, runs two risks that arose less frequently in the earlier work. The first is the danger of indulging in sound effects purely for their own sake without a firm basis in sense. The second is the danger of indulging in flights of pure fancy, carried on a flood of unanchored rhetoric. Occasionally, though not often, both occur together, resulting in writing that is merely self-indulgent. On the other hand, when the new mode works, there is a degree of spontaneity and freedom less often met with in the earlier work.

Inevitably, the question of the relation between Heaney's poetry and the civil war in Northern Ireland comes up. There is an explicit statement of his own position in part 4 of “The Flight Path.” Returning from New York in 1979, he encounters on the train to Belfast an old school friend “as if he were some film noir border guard” who “goes for me head on/When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write/Something for us?” Heaney replies: “.../If I do write something/Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself.” He goes on to liken his position to that of Dante walking behind “the righteous Virgil” through hell. Fair enough: true poetry can't be made out of propaganda. Yet I wonder how valid it is to compare the literal hell-on-earth of a civil war with Dante's journey through the inferno of his imagination. I couldn't help being struck by the irony of the fact that the *New York Times* review, titled “Poems Into Ploughshares,” in which no mention at all is made of the political situation in Northern Ireland, appeared directly opposite a review, titled “A Reporter in Hell,” of a British journalist's account of the slaughter in Rwanda in 1994—essentially the same situation as in Northern Ireland, only a thousand times more gruesome.

What responsibilities do artists and intellectuals bear in such tragic political situations? As a public figure of note—particularly since being awarded the Nobel Prize—Heaney is certainly in a position to exert some influence in Northern Ireland, yet his primary impulse seems to be to keep a low profile. Perhaps it is not an entirely fair comparison, but it is difficult to refrain from contrasting Heaney's public stance with that of Yeats who, for better or for worse, entered fully and passionately into the politics of his day, and many of whose most famous poems engage with Irish politics without surrendering his artistic integrity. It has frequently been suggested that certain of Heaney's earlier poems, most notably the bog poems in *North* constitute indirect commentary on the political situation in Northern Ireland. The same is doubtless true of “Mycenae Lookout,” a five-part poem concerned with the peace that followed the fall of

Troy, told from the viewpoint of a sentry. Bloody and despairing, the poem seems to hold out little hope of ever ending the endless cycle of fratricide and civil war. Though the writing is somber and powerful, it nevertheless seems imaginatively removed from the actuality of conditions in Northern Ireland.

A more direct confrontation with political reality is the horrific description of the murder of an Ulster reservist, embedded in the poem “Keeping On,” dedicated to Heaney's brother Hugh. Beginning with a clinical description of the wall the reservist was leaning back against: “Grey matter like gruel flecked with blood/In spatters on the whitewash. A clean spot/Where his head had been...,” it ends laconically with him “feeding the gutter with his copious blood.” At the conclusion of the poem he addresses his brother eloquently as follows:

*My dear brother, you have good stamina.  
You stay on where it happens. Your big tractor  
Pulls up at the Diamond, you wave at people,  
You shout and laugh about the vets, you keep  
Old roads open by driving on the new ones.  
You called the piper's sporrans whitewash  
brushes  
And then dressed up and marched us through  
the kitchen,  
But you cannot make the dead walk or right  
wrong.  
I see you at the end of your tether sometimes,  
In the milking parlor, holding yourself up  
Between two cows until your turn goes past,  
Then coming to in the smell of dung again  
And wondering, is this all? As it was  
In the beginning, is now and shall be?  
Then rubbing your eyes and seeing our old  
brush  
Up on the byrne door, and keeping going.*

Mixing personal memory with compassion for others and outrage at the senselessness of violence, this poem seems to me one of the strongest in the volume, as well as the closest that Heaney comes to direct reflection on the consequences of the civil war in Northern Ireland.

In trying to evaluate this volume as a whole, it is difficult to decide whether the nagging feeling of dissatisfaction I am left with is due to the intrinsic quality of the work itself or to the (perhaps unfair) expectation that a poet with Heaney's gifts ought to be able to do even better. If his natural impulse is toward the pastoral and the elegiac, is it reasonable to expect him to produce poetry that is more muscular, more engaged, more tragic? On the other hand, can our judgement of poetry ever be separated completely from the circumstances in which it is produced? While agreeing completely that artists must be granted the right to aesthetic autonomy, I also believe that the greatest art arises, directly or indirectly, out of the artist's confrontation with the political and cultural conditions of his or her time. Am I correct in suspecting that Heaney's art has not quite succeeded in reaching the highest moral and spiritual level that poetry is capable of because of a sort of failure of nerve, a profound reluctance to engage fully and directly with the ethical and spiritual dilemmas that daily confront the citizens of Northern Ireland, a deep desire to assuage and reconcile rather than to confront and protest? Or am I merely wishing that Heaney was a different kind of poet than he is? Is it bad manners on my part to insist that the poems in this volume, while exhibiting flashes of brilliance, are generally less rigorous and intense than those in his earlier volumes? Or should I be grateful that Heaney is as good as he is, and join in the chorus of hosannas that have followed in the wake of his Nobel prize? In the long run, the answers to these questions can only come from a detailed critical examination of Heaney's entire oeuvre. In the meantime, what I do feel sure of is that while the poems in this volume are without question the work of an excellent poet, one of the best writing today, they are not clearly the work of a great poet.

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# Fenton's Wooden Horse

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To do so, however, Fenton finds it necessary to rehearse every literary and political objection raised against Heaney's poetry since the publication of *North* in 1975, the volume which rocketed Heaney to international attention. In each case, Fenton takes the posture of the exasperated critic who, in the name of righting an obvious wrong, is forced to examine and almost refute each allegation, showing how the allegations, while having some merit in and of themselves, may even contradict one another. By essay's end, Fenton has recorded, *as of course in all fairness he must*, a great more about what is wrong with Heaney's poetry and politics than what is right with it. Fenton, however, finishes with a faint flourish for one of the poems in the new volume. Even here, alas, the eloquence expended on the single poem, placed in the context of the essay at large, smacks of a condescension which, given the national antagonisms he sets at play throughout the essay, one is tempted to describe as quintessentially English.

For openers, Fenton recalls the publication of Heaney's "An Open Letter," the 198-line verse letter (*Field Day Pamphlet #2*, 1983) objecting to his being labeled a British, as opposed to an Irish poet in the Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, published the year before. The verse letter, reprinted in *Harper's* (March 1987), is something of a good-natured and good-humored reminder that Heaney considered himself Irish, not British. At its most offensive, it might be seen as a reverse Irish joke, a funny reminder to those in power (at least in publishing) to review their premises.

Fenton, on the other hand, insists on a much more serious and literal reading. The poem is, he claims, a long-overdue righting of a terrible wrong. As he says, "Seamus Heaney exploded. He had had enough. He was not British, and he was fed up with being called British, or anything other than Irish." Still, while apparently applauding Heaney's principled stance in this now solemnly principled poem, Fenton slips in a few razor slashes on the side, as in this explication of a passage he cites:

Heaney was unhappy with the Burns stanza he had chosen, which leads him into many awkwardness, as here where he seems to overlook the fact that there were also Gaels who made their last stand in Scotland. And do we imagine that, writing in prose, he would have distinguished Catholic from Protestant by calling one lot native and the other *colon*? It seems unlikely.

Again, while stoutly defending Heaney's right to speak as an individual, Fenton adds that the poem comes "close to flag-waving" (and that's a nationalist as opposed to a unionist flag) when Heaney reminds his reader that his passport is green and that "No glass of ours was ever raised/ To toast *The Queen*." For Fenton, the "vehemence of this refusal" has "an aggressive Republican tone" which, he notes with some relief, Heaney modified considerably in his final lecture as Oxford professor three years ago.

One wonders why Fenton did not cite the stanza which follows the so-called vehement refusal, one which should have put his political and literary misgivings at ease:

*No harm to her nor you who deign  
To God Bless her as sovereign,  
of crown and rose  
Defied, displaced, would not combine  
What I'd espouse.  
("An Open Letter," 85-90)*

Be that as it may, Fenton, not letting the point or the poem go, flogs the expiring horse at several other points in the ostensibly laudatory essay. As he says, "Heaney was in a weak position, and knew it, which is one reason why 'An Open Letter' is not a good

poem (the other being that its versification is atrocious)." Still, Fenton adds with a burst of generosity, "'An Open Letter' was a poor poem, but an important event." Given Fenton's unwillingness to get the joke, one is left with the feeling that he might object to the contrived versification of a limerick.

This kind of commentary is puzzling in at least two respects. First, Fenton, of all people, should have been able to pick up on the political ironies and genial satire informing the poem. After all, a good portion of his own poetry is filled with irony and satire that, at times, starts out as high-camp high jinks only to turn into cutting ridicule. Consider this stanza from "Poem Against Catholics" which he co-authored with John Fuller:

*"Not now," cries Mrs. Macnamara, "later!"  
When leapt on by her husband (what a  
beast).  
"It says so on my Catholic calculator.  
It also says so on my Catholic priest."  
She'd do much better with a mortal coil  
To spoil the child and spare the husband's  
rod.  
Why don't they put a bill through in the  
Dáil?  
God we hate Catholics and their Catholic  
God.*

The poem goes on to send up psychotic saints, Catholic confession, Anglicans ("High Anglo-Catholics"), and communion as cannibalism, all with undaunted irreverence and elaborately contorted rhyme. Fenton, the son of an Anglican vicar, can doubtless claim some kind of hereditary expertise in these matters. Still, while English critics were amused by the wit and irreverence (Ian Parker characterizes the collaborative poems as "rather donnish whimsical verse"), it's easy to imagine an Irish literary critic, such as Seamus Deane, reaching for a different set of adjectives. In any event, one would think that the strategies of "An Open Letter" would be right up Fenton's alley.

The second question that this commentary raises is its relevancy to Fenton's task at hand. Why would Fenton, in a review which sets out to address the recent publications of Heaney, spend over a third of his essay selectively explicating a verse letter written 13 years ago and never collected in a volume? What American readers saw as a genial but well-deserved rejoinder to the condescending assumptions of British publishers, has apparently simmered inside Fenton's head these past thirteen years (With Dante in the air, one is reminded of Heaney's version of the Ugolino section of *The Inferno*, in which the Count gnaws away at the skull of the Archbishop as he recounts his tale).

Initially, it seems Fenton wishes to unsully the reputations of Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, the two editors of the anthology, to whom the verse letter was addressed, and whom Heaney's poem made "look a little foolish." Blake Morrison, in particular, was one of Fenton's avid supporters in his election to the Oxford Professorship, comparing Fenton's poetry with that of Wilfred Owen and W. H. Auden. In addition, last year Penguin brought out a combined selection of poetry by Fenton, Morrison, and Kit Wright in their *Modern Poets* series, further linking the two.

As it happens, though, Fenton's defense of Morrison leads him to introduce a lengthy objection to Heaney's poetry which was lodged by A. Alvarez two years earlier than either the Motion/Morrison anthology or Heaney's subsequent verse-letter response. Morrison and Motion, in compiling their anthology, were hoping to indicate that British poetry had taken forms other than those Alvarez had promoted in his 1962 anthology *The New Poetry*. Morrison/Motion had held up Heaney as an example of these new forms. Fenton goes on to quote at length from an 1980 Alvarez review of Heaney's *Field Work*, in which Alvarez

indicts the admiration which many British critics have for Heaney's poetry as an indication of what is wrong with British culture. Heaney's poetry (at least back in 1980) illustrated a preference on the part of the British reading public for "safety, sweetness, and light" as opposed to the "whole, troubled exploratory thrust of modern poetry." The implication for Fenton from these passages (which must "have stuck in Heaney's craw," says Fenton) is that Heaney is simply "an Irish entertainer on the British cultural scene," (Fenton's phrase, not Alvarez's) and again Fenton speculates: "It must have been exasperating to Heaney."

What's going on here? Why is Fenton dealing with A. Alvarez and his comments on Heaney's *Field Work* 16 years ago in an essay which Fenton is supposedly devoting to Heaney's recent publications? I guess it would help to know that Fenton's never taken kindly to Alvarez's advocacy of the confessional/on the verge/intensely personal poetry associated with Robert Lowell, Ted Hughes, and Sylvia Plath (Fenton's 1972 "Letter to John Fuller" is a merciless verse-letter mockery of Alvarez's criticism). And so one might assume that anything Alvarez rails against might find some favor with Fenton (and vice versa). But even here, Fenton gets it wrong. In light of the kind of poetry Alvarez had called for, Fenton says querulously, rather than dismiss Heaney as an entertainer, "One might have predicted that *North* would appeal to him." As it happened, though, *North* did appeal to Alvarez, and appealed to him in the same essay review which Fenton cites to Heaney's disadvantage.

Here's what Alvarez says on that volume in the essay:

The exception is *North*, his fourth and best book, which opened with an imposing sequence of poems linking the grim Irish present with its even grimmer past of Norse invasions and ancient feuding. The tone was appropriately stern, but also distanced, the language spare, as though stripped back to its Anglo-Saxon skeleton. For the space of these dozen and a half poems Heaney seemed to have found a theme so absorbing that charm and rhetoric were irrelevant. The poems were as simple, demanding, and irreducible as the archaic trophies from the bog which they celebrated. And like an archeologist, he pared away the extraneous matter and kept himself decently in the background.

(*The New York Review of Books*, March 6, 1980, 16)

If anything, Alvarez faults Heaney for turning away from the kind of poetry he sees in *North* to what Alvarez considers the more rhetorical and ornamental poetry he finds in *Field Work*. In short, Alvarez's commentary and criticism focuses on questions of literary style.

Toward the end of the essay, Fenton will parenthetically admit that he didn't like the first part of *North* ("I don't care much for what he fishes out of bogs"), but at this point Fenton's empathy with what he imagines to be Heaney's exasperation and outrage with Alvarez's review takes another, somewhat convoluted, twist: "Most exasperating of all, though, would be to feel that *these misapprehensions about your nationality* [my italics] were, in part, your fault. For it would never have been so easy for the British to take whatever they liked from Ireland and call it British if a protest had been lodged a little earlier."

Something odd occurs in the thinking here: Heaney writes "An Open Letter" in 1983, which embarrasses Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison. Three years earlier, A. Alvarez had criticized Seamus Heaney's *Field Work* (but not *North*) on matters of literary style and content, which Fenton sees as having primarily to do with Heaney's being Irish. Now if only Heaney had written "An Open Letter" a few years earlier than he did, Alvarez would not have been able to criticize Heaney's poetry as British, because

everyone would now agree that British and Irish poetry are separate. Whether Heaney's poetry, in 1980 or 1996, has any literary merit is pushed to the margin, if not off the entire page, and Fenton can, at last, proclaim what he sees as closure to the controversy started with Heaney's "Open Letter" back in 1983.

Fenton cites the last of Heaney's Oxford lectures, given in 1993, in which Heaney expands on the poem's implications. Heaney explains that he spoke about the greenness of his passport in "An Open Letter" "not in order to expunge the British connection in Britain's Ireland but to maintain the right to diversity *within* the border, to be understood as having full freedom to the enjoyment of an Irish name and identity within that northern jurisdiction." For Fenton, this ecumenicalism constitutes a "considerable rewriting" of the earlier poem, and Fenton's impatience with Heaney's conciliatory description of Irish and British multiculturalism in Northern Ireland momentarily flares, "as if," he says, "for the Northern Irish Catholic, his Irishness were a kind of wheat germ which he sprinkled every morning on his—what would it be? on his Britishness?"

Fenton's intrusive habit of placing himself inside Heaney's head to imagine what might have, or must have, been Heaney's intention or reaction to a variety of literary acts here reaches its culmination. For Fenton, Heaney's final Oxford lecture should be seen as nothing short of an embarrassing repudiation of the earlier, unjustified outburst in "An Open Letter." As Fenton says:

The embarrassment behind the rewrite, so many years later, of a poem which he published only in pamphlet form, is indicative perhaps of a lingering sense that, though he had no alternative but to make his stand, the stand itself was some kind of betrayal, or some kind of slap in the face of people to whom he was, in various ways, obliged.

"Embarrassment"? "Betrayal"? Just as it would be difficult to detect the explosive, nationalistic outrage Fenton ascribes to "An Open Letter," anyone reading Heaney's final Oxford lecture would be hard pressed to discover some trace of the chagrin Fenton plants there. The lecture instead concludes on a note of tolerance, advocating a multicultural flexibility in matters of national identity, especially as concerns Northern Ireland. Using his own formation as a case in point, Heaney draws both a literary and political lesson for all sides to learn:

There is nothing extraordinary about the challenge to be in two minds. If, for example, there was something exacerbating, there was still nothing deleterious to my sense of Irishness in the fact that I grew up in the minority in Northern Ireland and was educated within the dominant British culture. My identity was emphasized rather than eroded by being maintained in such circumstances. The British dimension, in other words, while it is something that will be resisted by the minority if it is felt to be coercive, has nevertheless been a given of our history and even of our geography, one of the places where we all live, willy-nilly. It's in the language.

(*The Redress of Poetry*, 202)

What Fenton would have us understand, though, is that Heaney's final Oxford lecture brings to the fore a motif of betrayal which, Fenton will claim in the remainder of the essay, has dogged Heaney's entire poetic career.

\*\*\*\*\*

So who is this James Fenton, and why does he wish to recast Seamus Heaney's career from this volatile, nationalistic point of view?

In many respects, James Fenton is a privileged, if somewhat typical, product of the English educational system. He was born in Lincoln in the north of England in 1949. His father, as mentioned above, was an Anglican

vicar (and is currently Honorary Canon Emeritus of Christ Church, Oxford). One of four children, Fenton was sent as a boarder to Choristers' School, Durham, an English prep-school, and later to public school at Repton, near Litchfield. Fenton went on to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he read psychology, philosophy, and physiology. He won the Newdigate poetry award as an undergraduate, and published his first book of poems, *Terminal Moraine*, in 1972.

In 1973, at the age of twenty-four, he flew to Cambodia and settled in Phnom Penh, supported partly by a poetry grant and partly by freelance essays he submitted to *The New Statesman*. He was, as he indicates in his 1988 book of travel writings, *All the Wrong Places*, an opponent of United States imperialism in the region and therefore an idealistic supporter of both the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the Vietcong in Vietnam. In 1975, Fenton was evacuated, along with all foreigners, from Phnom Penh, and moved to Saigon, where he witnessed the fall of that city to the North Vietnamese army. Therefore, in addition to the victories, as he saw them, of the indigenous armies over foreign imperialism, he was witness as well to the fall of Saigon, the extermination of the South Vietnamese officer corps, and the systematic genocide of Cambodia under Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge. His experiences in Southeast Asia, as well as other journalist assignments in Germany, were incorporated into *The Memory of War and Children of Exile: Poems 1968-1982* (1983), which in many ways propelled Fenton to national recognition. The book was hailed by English critics as a breakthrough, and Peter Porter, the English poet, called Fenton "the most talented poet of his generation."

He continued to work as a literary journalist in a number of capacities throughout the late 70's and 80's, as a political writer for *The New Statesman*, as correspondent to Germany for *The Guardian*, as theater critic for the *Sunday Times*, and as Southeast Asian correspondent for the *Independent*, the newspaper for which he presently writes a column. In 1988, he co-authored, with John Fuller, *Partingtime Hall*, a collection of poems lampooning a range of targets, among them Catholics, literary critics, and life in Belfast. His most recent collection, *Out of Danger*, was published to mixed reviews in 1993.

In addition to poetry, journalism, and travel writing, one other aspect of Fenton's literary work has turned out to be enormously profitable for him. In 1983, after Fenton translated "Rigoletto" for the English National Opera, Cameron Mackintosh asked him to work on a musical version of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Even though Mackintosh fired Fenton a year later, the severance deal allowed Fenton a small percentage of the world-wide receipts. As it happens, the musical has gone on to gross over £600,000,000, and it has made Fenton a millionaire several times over. This windfall has allowed him to purchase, among other things, a shrimp farm in the Philippines, an apartment in the fashionable section of central London, and a 150-acre estate near Oxford.

For all the enthusiastic recognition that Fenton's war poems and travel writings have brought him in England, others have expressed sharp reservations about the prose and poetry, as well as the point of view, if that's the right term, which he presents in his writings. On the one hand, in his political reporting from Southeast Asia, Fenton, rather than assuming the "objective" stance of the detached reporter, much prefers to embed his sense of the historical events he witnesses in terms of his personal, and at times whimsical, response to the chaos and violence occurring around him. Bill Buford, the editor of *Granta* who published Fenton's essays on Vietnam and the Philippines, calls his prose "a breath of real pure oxygen" and has nothing but praise for this kind of "narrative reportage." On the other hand, Benedict

Anderson, the Southeast Asia scholar and human rights activist, finds fault with this subjective whimsicality. In a withering analysis of Fenton's "The Snap Revolution" [in the Philippines] and "The Fall of Saigon," Anderson rebukes this posture as an example of what he calls "political tourism." As he says, "What both these texts perfectly demonstrate is that, for the Fentons of this world, politics *an sich* are wholly unimportant and uninteresting. They become interesting only insofar as they produce brief, torchlit spectacles in exotic places." ("James Fenton's Slideshow," in *New Left Review*, July/August 1986, 81-90)

The poetry presents a different kind of complexity since Fenton writes, as Julian Symons suggests, at least three kinds of poems, only one of which Symons considers significant. He says, in his 1983 review of *Children of Exile*,

There are three poetic Fentons, two of comparatively minor interest. One offers botanical, psychological or medical "exempla" taken from books or other printed works as poems, rather in the whimsical manner of the surrealists exhibiting 'found objects' as art. Another produces light verse that is always lively, sometimes funny, and often marked by a deadly topicality... The third Fenton, however, has fulfilled what 'Our Western Furniture' promised, in a dozen magnificent poems. It is notable that almost all of them have their origins in his Cambodian and German experiences. (*The Times*, London, November 20, 1983, 38)

Not everyone is willing to follow Symons' taxonomy and embrace of one part of Fenton's poetry, while dismissing the rest. Arjuna Parakrama, in his 1994 review of *Out of Danger*, comes down hard on what he sees as the political and cultural assumptions running through Fenton's poetry. While he applauds (and agrees with) Fenton's criticism of U.S. world hegemony, he finds Fenton unable or unwilling to subject his own "maleness and cultural specificity" [that is, his Englishness] to the same kind of self-reflexivity and radical questioning found in the opening personal poems. Even further, at the conclusion of an explication of "Jerusalem," Fenton's quite serious meditation on the mutually destructive antagonisms of the Middle East, Parakrama charges, "The poet's ability to literally divorce and isolate Jerusalem from the urgent and catastrophic political realities of the area is symptomatic of the unquestioned privilege that he enjoys as classed-gendered-raced-regioned outsider." (*Critical Quarterly*, Summer 1994, 111-114)

At another point, Parakrama finds no humor whatsoever in "On a Recent Indiscretion by a Certain Fulbright Fellow in Upper Egypt," a 36-line exercise in forced alliteration which Fenton presents as a light-verse send-up of the Fulbright Program and, presumably, American foreign policy. The poem's final quatrain sums up the poem's method and intent:

*And the moral of this episode  
May be set forth forthrightly  
Don't go fellating fellahin!  
You're a Fulbright Fellow! It's unsightly!*

For Parakrama, the subject matter and the manner of presentation are "palpably guilty of racism, homophobia, insensitivity, bad taste, cultural stereotyping and so on and so forth, but the bigger indictment is perhaps that the poem is puerile, even silly." What bothers Parakrama about this and other poems in the collection is that Fenton is willing to ridicule France, the U.S., Emily Dickinson, and Helen Vendler, but he is not willing to direct his ironic barbs against his home country and culture in the same way.

Since Fenton only takes on what Parakrama calls "non-home" topics for ridicule, he

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# Fenton's Wooden Horse

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falls prey to "the tendency to oversimplify and distort, which is the very devil to resist when one doesn't have to put one's money where one's mouth is." In these poems of political and cultural satire, Parakrama suggests, "You are never sure whether the poet is playing with you and this has its obvious strength in complicating the reader's response, but also its weakness because he can always get himself off the hook, if challenged." The upshot of this kind of poetry presents, for Parakrama, its own kind of subtle irony: "Fenton has placed himself 'out of danger' from mainstream local (he's a jolly good fellow of the Royal Society) critique. He recuperates, therefore, in effect, a troubling Tory English nationalism without having to say one word about it."

Clearly, Parakrama's objections did not carry much weight two years ago when the voting was conducted at Oxford for the five-year post of Professor of Poetry. Ian Parker, in a *New Yorker* essay (July 25, 1994) which reviews Fenton's multifaceted career and the events surrounding the election, sees Fenton as "Auden's Heir" (the title of the essay) and provides a colorful portrait of Fenton in relation to his contemporaries.

For Parker, Fenton's elevation to the Oxford post marks a shift in England's sensibility to the "New Recklessness," a term Fenton coins in *Out of Danger* indicating a willingness to test established limits and conventions and to jump from genre to genre. As Parker reports,

In the *New Recklessness*, Fenton told me, poets should yodel or write sonnet sequences, as they see fit. They should be suspicious of the free-verse consensus and any pull toward autobiographical pathos. Poets should reserve the right to do what Fenton, for example, has done, which is to avoid the confessional and to take metre into new and marvelous places of public and private alarm while keeping an eye on Byron, W. H. Auden, Lewis Carroll, eighteenth-century satire, and the music hall.

As part of the droll portrait he draws of the new Professor of Poetry, Parker recounts Fenton's patience and determination in his candidacy for the post, which Fenton had kept his eye on for over a decade. As Parker says, "Ten years ago, Fenton stood against Peter Levi, who won. Five years ago, he did not stand against the Irishman, Seamus Heaney, who won. This year, in a field with three rivals, including the Australian Les Murray, he was determined to win." Parker goes on to describe the tactics the candidate employed in his campaign for the post, and, since these tactics include Fenton's shrewd understanding of the uses of literary journalism, it's worth quoting in full. Parker says:

James Fenton tells me that he made two key contributions to his campaign for the Oxford

preferment. One was to plan a party, in his garden, to be held on the second, and final day, of voting. ("Of course it was a vote-rigging exercise," he says, "You think I don't know how to vote-rig?") The other was to allow himself to be interviewed in the *Times*. The interview included this vote-winning exchange:

Q: Les Murray, who I suppose is your main rival, told another paper that he had heard that the duties of the professor of poetry were not particularly onerous. Is that your impression?  
A: I saw that article.... I have to say that it made me think that Les Murray had been very badly advised. First of all, it seems insulting to imply that the job you are standing for is a doddle. Secondly, it is very much in my mind that the task of writing 15 worthwhile lectures on poetry is not to be taken lightly.

It is important to know that the questions as well as the answers were Fenton's. The *Times* was somehow persuaded to allow Fenton, quite openly, to interview himself. This was a "filthy trick," Fenton says merrily. He's capable of making the display of avidity seem endearing.

Whether the stratagem was merry or malicious, it proved quite effective with the elite electorate (only Oxonians with M.A.'s are allowed to cast ballots). In the final tally, Fenton received 228 votes, with Les Murray as runner up receiving 98). As Parker concludes, "James Fenton was the chief poet of all England."

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With these credentials in mind, let's return to the remainder of "The Orpheus of Ulster." Fenton, having speculated about Heaney's conversion from outrage to embarrassment concerning "An Open Letter," now shifts the venue of Heaney criticism from London to Northern Ireland. Fenton first rehearses the charge James Simmons, the Protestant Ulster poet, made concerning the unfair preference Heaney received early on from Philip Hobsbaum. Simmons had said: "Certainly, it began long ago. In those old gatherings under the auspices of Philip Hobsbaum it was obvious that Seamus was being groomed for stardom." Rushing to Heaney's defense, Fenton says, "I would put this differently.... The fact is that no poet gets 'groomed for stardom.' What on earth would that process be? But that he was *tipped* for stardom, that he gave, somehow, warning of the talent to come—that I can believe." Even though Fenton italicizes "tipped," the term he prefers to "groomed," both words have a clear implication of Heaney being picked out of a group of poets, and of Heaney being given special preference, before his poetry actually warranted such distinction. Under the guise of defending Heaney, Fenton simply puts the criticism in more precise language.

Fenton then goes on to the more serious charges of betrayal which Simmons sets out

in his essay. For Simmons, Fenton duly notes, Heaney had not addressed the troubles of Northern Ireland as forthrightly or as neutrally as he should have. Instead, he "seemed to be retreating into his tribe" (i.e. identifying too closely with the Catholic minority) and therefore fostering resentment in the North rather than addressing the issues from a more universal perspective, one which Simmons identifies with a "positive left-wing movement." After lamenting that poets throughout this century have been accused of betrayal, Fenton links this charge to a more specific accusation leveled by Ciaran Carson based on a reading of "Punishment," one of the poems in *North*.

The poem, in which Heaney closely identifies with a young girl who had been presumably drowned for adultery in prehistory and whose body had been preserved in the Jutland bog, closes with the past act of retribution providing a commentary on the present violence of Northern Ireland. Drawing an analogy between the girl killed in prehistory for adultery and the young Catholic girls who had been tarred and feathered for going out with British soldiers, the speaker concludes on a note of self-revelation and accusation:

*I who have stood dumb  
when your betraying sisters,  
cauled in tar,  
wept by the railings,*

*who would connive  
in civilized outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intimate revenge.*

Heaney, for Carson, is a "laureate of violence" since the poem's ending, rather than protesting the conditions which bring such acts into being, provides these conditions with a kind of inevitability which mystifies rather than resists their origins. Fenton then suggests that Carson's remarks "might be fair criticism"—adding that the same passage has caused "numerous" other critics, such as Blake Morrison and Edna Longley, "consternation." But when Simmons goes a step further, and here Fenton provides another long citation from Simmons, and accuses Heaney of being "on the side of the torturers," well, that's just too much for Fenton.

The easiest way for Fenton to have dealt with these charges, of course, would be to illustrate the misreading upon which they are based. When Simmons asserts in his accusation that "He does not seem to be confessing or apologizing" in this passage, he is simply wrong. In the two stanzas preceding the controversial conclusion cited above, the speaker makes quite clear the moral circumstances under which he has reached his impasse:

*I almost love you  
but would have cast, I know,  
the stones of silence.*

*I am the artful voyeur*

*of your brain's exposed  
and darkened combs,  
your muscles' webbing  
and all your numbered bones:*

The poem confesses as much the guilt of the artist exploiting an act of violence as the guilt of a partisan harboring secret resentments. But guilt it is, and Fenton clearly knows the passage (John 8:P 1-11) to which Heaney alludes in his phrase "but would have cast, I know, / the stones of silence." The compassion Jesus reminded the Pharisees of as they picked up their stones to kill the woman taken in adultery is linked here to the "stones of silence" the speaker imagines he would have cast in the past, and has cast by standing dumb in the face of the present outrages. But unlike Jesus, the divine moralist writing out the sins of the Pharisees in the sands, the speaker is instead the human sinner, implicated in the very sins he writes out on the page.

Rather than provide this refutation, though, Fenton, having elaborated these accusations and agreed with them in the main, halts at Simmons' excess with, "Simmons knows perfectly well that Heaney is not on the side of the torturers." He finishes his defense of Heaney with a sentence that is more convoluted than exculpatory:

If the poems in the first part of *North* were worrying to his genuine (as opposed to his ironical) admirers, it must be because they sometimes failed to reassure the reader about the difference between understanding the processes at work (understanding them, with a full sense of the terror involved) and understanding-as-forgiving or even as conniving.

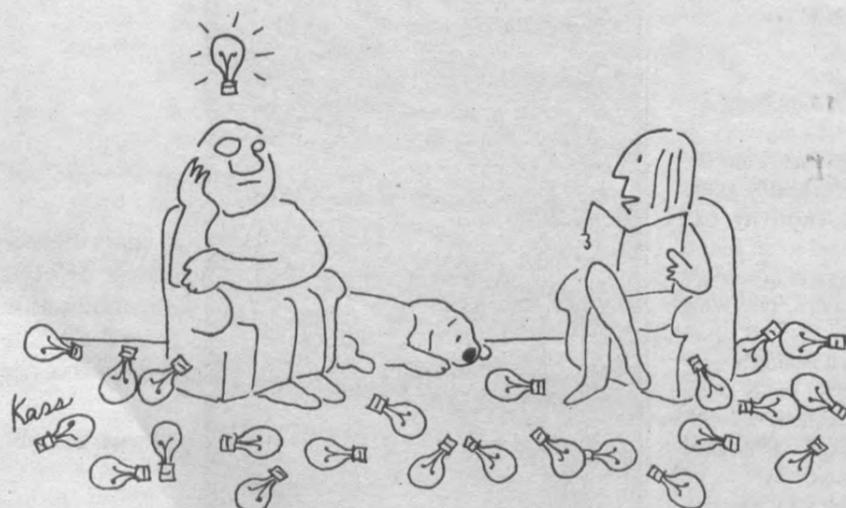
At this point one has to wonder exactly who the "ironical" admirers of Heaney being alluded to here are, the Ulster poets making the charge of partisanship or "the chief poet of all England" innocently citing one accusation after another.

Even though Fenton points out that the extremity of these accusations about violence is at the other end of the spectrum from Alvarez's portrait of Heaney as a safe entertainer, he does not tell his reader that the Heaney-as-extremist role, in which Fenton cast the Irish poet in the first part of the essay, is here being played out, and reinforced, from a different perspective. But to be sure that this train of association is not derailed, Fenton immediately goes on to quote in its entirety a ballad Heaney wrote early in his career, but never published, satirizing William Craig, the head of the Black & Tans. Fenton's purpose in quoting this ballad is to demonstrate that Heaney *might* have put his poetic muse in the service of the IRA, but did not. The commentary Fenton provides at the end of the ballad, though, allows the dorsal fin of his sarcasm to break the surface:

Stirring stuff. One can almost smell the rain on the Aran sweaters of the protesters who would have sung it. And I hope that when Heaney produces his collected poems he will allow us to see more of his work in this vein, including the song he wrote after Bloody Sunday in Derry, January 30, 1972, which has apparently never seen the light of day. But the point was that times changed, changed and grew worse, until to write that sort of stirring stuff was no longer an option.

What makes this kind of selectivity, distortion, and guilt-by implication (that must have been some outrageous song!) so discouraging and fundamentally unfair is that Heaney has written, and written powerfully, about Bloody Sunday, and Fenton knows it.

"Casualty," a poem included in *Field Work* (Alvarez missed that in his review), speaks directly to the killing of the 13 civil-



"Shouldn't you start getting some of those down on paper?"

Gary Kass

see *Fenton's Wooden Horse*, page 11

# Fenton's Wooden Horse

continued from page 10

ian protesters by the British paratroopers that day in 1972. But more importantly, the poem focuses on the counterbalancing example of the Catholic fisherman Heaney knew from his father-in-law's pub, the loner who defied the Catholic curfew and was blown to death by an IRA bomb. The speaker of that poem, caught between the constrictive "swaddling band" of the victimized group and the maverick example of the fisherman, comes down on the side of the alcoholic artisan who, at his own risk, places his need, his desire, before that of his community. If anything, the vernacular craft and manner of the fisherman provide the speaker with an exemplary ethic and aesthetic and place him (and Heaney) well beyond the partisan nationalism Fenton is so loudly hinting at.

Instead of pointing to this poem (or the many different ways the speaker plays out the same dilemma in *Station Island* (1984), Fenton simply leaves his reader with the insinuation that Heaney wrote as a partisan nationalist early on in his career, then came to disguise that nationalism more and more when it became less expedient to write that kind of "stirring stuff" in light of his growing audience in Britain and elsewhere. In short, Heaney has tailored his poetry to the popular political sensibility of his expanding audience.

All this dredging up of accusation and insinuation from 15, 20, and 25 years ago prepares Fenton, finally, to consider briefly Heaney's Nobel address and the last of Heaney's Oxford lectures. From the Nobel address, predictably enough, Fenton chooses to cite Heaney's sense of shock when, for a single moment, he found himself considering justifications for the political violence in the North. Fenton responds to Heaney's repudiation of such a momentary lapse with the following: "Only a moment, and if it was the *only* such moment then Heaney was lucky, since the situation was such as to provoke many such moments in many such people." Note the "if," which questions rather than affirms Heaney's statement.

From the final Oxford lecture, Fenton highlights the passage in which Heaney, comparing himself to John Hume, finds himself in the "classic bind of all Northern Ireland's constitutional nationalists": on the one hand, having cultural and political ideals which are fundamentally Ireland-centered; on the other, insisting on distinguishing the goals of such ideals from the violent means employed by the IRA. Rather than address this political and ethical dilemma, Fenton reminds his readers that Hume has devoted himself to shuttle diplomacy between Ulster and London throughout the Northern troubles, while Heaney was making his reputation elsewhere. As he says, "And just as it turned out recently that one part of the solution to the Ulster peace process (assuming that is what it is) lay in the United States, so

it has turned out, for Heaney, that an important part of his becoming a major Irish poet took place in the environs of Harvard Yard." The implication is clear: Hume has done the work in Ulster, while Heaney has advanced his career in Cambridge.

Again and again, Fenton raises accusations and troublesome issues, not so much to refute or even address them, but rather first to call attention to them, then to arrange them in such a way that they present their own consistency. Heaney the betrayer, Heaney the equivocator, Heaney the grandstander all make their appearance in this essay simply, Fenton purports, so that he can sympathetically illustrate the difficulty attendant to fame and notoriety, especially to one in the peculiar political and cultural circumstances which Heaney has experienced. It's a strategy which drags Heaney through the thorns while Fenton, Heaney's literary compatriot, frowns compassionately from the sidelines.

Having jerryrigged this rhetorical context, Fenton at long last turns to Heaney the poet. First Fenton reminds us that Heaney is interested in the figure of Orpheus, having recently translated two sections of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* dealing with that mythological character. Fenton tells us that, at a reading he recently attended at which Heaney read the section dealing with Orpheus' death, he had the odd sense that Heaney was "utterly outraged that Orpheus (as if this had happened yesterday) had been torn to pieces." Again, when one actually reads the translation in the *After Ovid* collection (1994) put together by Michael Hoffman and James Lasdun, it turns out that Bacchus, rather than Heaney, is the figure outraged by Orpheus' death. Fenton, however, has his own speculative explanation for Heaney's resentment: "Perhaps the feeling is that if you possess the power, you are going to pay for it." What first appeared as rage turns out to be self-pity.

And what follows that speculation is a marvelous double-take on Heaney's power and excitement. Fenton says, "Certainly he possesses that power. I went to the reading he gave in Oxford, with Ted Hughes, at the end of his professorship and thought it the most exciting reading I had heard. It was exciting before it began, and it just went on from there." But what can "before it began" mean? The excitement of the *event* is very carefully separated from the excitement of the poetry, transforming Heaney and Hughes (whom Fenton has never thought highly of) from powerful poets into celebrity entertainers.

As a reasonable critic, however, Fenton does not want to appear to be too much on Heaney's side. He therefore, in a deft stroke of apparent evenhandedness, concedes that he had his own reservations about Heaney's writing:

I don't feel obliged to take all Heaney (for instance, I like part two better than part one of

*North*; my loss, no doubt, but I don't much care for what he fishes out of bogs). I didn't like what I conceived to be writing as if living under an Eastern European censorship. But 1989 seems to have put a stop to all that.

But what appear to be modest enough reservations about Heaney's writing contain their own acid implications. Remember it was Fenton who chose to highlight the poem "Punishment" (from part one of *North*) in rehearsing the accusations against Heaney. And Fenton's defense of Heaney against the most extreme of those accusations left open the possibility that Heaney did not in fact make his own opposition to the nationalist violence clear enough. Further, Fenton's defensiveness as an Englishman bristles when Heaney writes about the political and literary oppression in Northern Ireland (those poems, interestingly enough, are to be found in part two of *North*). The last sentence, however, seems to make no sense whatsoever. Did Heaney stop writing about censorship in Northern Ireland because Eastern Europe as such came to its literal and metaphoric end in 1989 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union? Or did Heaney change his tune about the conditions of being Northern Irish the moment (in 1989) he became Professor of Poetry at Oxford?

Whichever the case, Fenton will finally turn in the last few paragraphs of his essay to *The Spirit Level*, where Heaney "keeps up the provision of pleasure." But before he gets to the single poem he wants to praise, Fenton lets us in on a delicious secret he discovered when "The Errand," the poem from which the collection takes its title, arrived in proof form with an erratum slip. Fenton realizes that the poem originally had only its first stanza, in which the father's command to find a bubble for the spirit level provides a metaphor for writing a poem. But when Heaney adds a second stanza, because, as Fenton speculates, the "rest of us would not be able to intuit" Heaney's intent with the first stanza alone, he changes the focus of the poem from poetic inspiration to the boy's relation with his father. (One wonders whether Fenton has read *Seeing Things* (1991), in which Heaney elaborates the complex relation between his father and his poetry.) Either way, one is left with the question: does Fenton make this observation to emphasize Heaney's genius, or to indicate that Heaney, in the name of reaching a wider audience, has dumbed down a good poem?

No matter how ambiguous the essay has been up to this point, a reader would surely, at first blush, be persuaded that the final paragraph is laudatory. After all, Fenton cites the poem "The Butter Print" in its entirety, and says that it "went straight into my personal anthology of the best of Heaney." But what are we to make of the essay's final words which sum up both the individual poem and Heaney's position as a poet? Here are Fenton's closing remarks:

When I look at a poem like this for the first time, I ask myself: How did it do that? How did we get from the butter-print to heaven and back down to the "awn" so quickly? It's like watching the three-card trick in Oxford Street. Suddenly the table is folded up under the arm and the trickster vanishes into the crowd—excepting that, when you tap your pocket, you find you have something valuable you could have sworn wasn't there just a moment before.

Now, from one perspective, this surely seems a tip of the hat to Heaney in exchange for the unexpected pleasure Fenton derives from the poem. But the metaphor is very strange indeed. Having watched a street trickster perform his act, you "tap your pocket" presumably to see if you still have your wallet. Is the "something valuable" you find in your pocket the unexpected pleasure of the poem, or is it simply your wallet that hasn't been stolen? In either case, Fenton obliquely casts Heaney as a street slicky, a role which draws a not-so-pleasant parallel between Heaney's recent tenure as Professor of Poetry at Oxford (for which he gave three lectures a year) and the three-card hustler who works Oxford Street. Having interpreted for us Alvarez's characterization of Heaney back in 1980 as "an Irish entertainer on the British cultural scene," Fenton now leaves us with a Heaney who, if anything, has degenerated from cultural entertainer to sidestreet charlatan. Be that as it may, the Orpheus of Ulster puts on quite a show; we have Fenton's word on it.

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In his last year at prep school, James Fenton was head boy, the senior overseer who traditionally tyrannizes the younger students. Fenton notes archly that Tony Blair, M.P., the leader of the British Labour Party, was four years his junior at the exclusive school and was therefore addressed by Fenton as "Blair," or rather "Blair!" He imagines that, should Blair become the next Prime Minister, he could stand outside 10 Downing Street and say "Blair!" and the new Prime Minister would still be forced to humbly heed his grammar school superior.

The editor of *The New York Review of Books*, headlining what he thought was an essay of tribute and appreciation, placed the banner "James Fenton on the Genius of Seamus Heaney" on the July 11 cover. But had the editor probed this horse at the gates, so to speak, the banner may well have read "James Fenton Hollers 'Heaney!'" Even though it's unlikely the essay will either enhance or diminish Heaney's reputation in Ireland or the United States, Fenton has, with a sly wink, let the dons at high tables know that there's a new head boy of poetry at Oxford, and this time he's one of England's own.

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# Joseph Mitchell's Oral History

Jon Michaud

Joseph Mitchell died on May 24 at the age of 87. A few months before his death, he gave his first public reading, at Books & Co. in Manhattan. A large crowd squeezed into the narrow second floor of the bookstore to hear him. He came, small and heavily spectacled, but still dapper and recognizable from the old photographs of him that adorn the covers of his books. He stood and read from *Joe Gould's Secret*, his last book, which had just been reissued by the Modern Library. His voice, a little shaky and hesitant at first, grew stronger and more confident as he read, the southern cadences of his prose falling musically in the overheated room. Later he would say that he was nervous, but that the memories of the times he had written about had overcome his nervousness and carried him away.

The New York that Mitchell wrote about is long gone. You can see glimmers of it now and then if you go to the places he described—the Fulton Fish Market, the Bowery, McSorley's Ale House—but as a living, thriving entity, it was passing out of existence even as he was watching and recording it. The sense of transience, of inevitable change dominates Mitchell's work. So many of his characters were the last of their kind, working at trades that were becoming outdated, telling stories about a way of life that was all but forgotten. In an irony that he understood well, Mitchell himself became the last of his kind. Interviewed in 1992, he said: "At the old *New Yorker*, the people were wonderful writers. A lot of us would go to lunch together: Liebling and Perelman and Thurber...Now, everybody goes in and out. I go to lunch at the Grand Central Oyster Bar and eat by myself."

Mitchell was born in 1908 in Fairmont, North Carolina, a farming community. In his 1938 collection of newspaper stories, *My Ears are Bent*, he says that his childhood reading of James Bryce's *American Commonwealth* filled him with the desire to become a political reporter. He came to New York in 1929, arriving in Pennsylvania Station the day after the stock market crash. He found work covering Police Headquarters for *The World*. At night, after he had filed his stories, he would wander the city, "discovering what the Depression and the prudence of white men were doing to a people who are 'the last to be hired; the first to be fired.'" He says he became "so fascinated by the melodrama of the metropolis at night that I forgot my ambition to become a political reporter." In 1931, he "got sick of the whole business" and went to sea on a freighter that sailed for Leningrad. He spent time in Russia and then returned, working once more as a reporter for *The Herald Tribune* and *The World Telegram*. By this time, he claims, he had "long since lost the ability to detect insanity."

In 1938, Mitchell joined the staff of *The New Yorker*. The change of working conditions, from the endless pressing deadlines of the newspaper to the more relaxed atmosphere fostered by *New Yorker* editor Harold Ross allowed Mitchell to transform himself from a reporter into an artist. His newspaper profiles had, of necessity, been hasty works



Photo by Maryland Stuart

## Joseph Mitchell in 1959

of summary capped with a punch line quote. At *The New Yorker*, he had the room to pile up details. His later stories are filled with lists, lovingly compiled, like this catalog of fish from the menu of Sloppy Louie's restaurant in *Up in the Old Hotel* which bears two trademarks of Mitchell's style, elegance and precision: "...cod cheeks, salmon cheeks, cod tongues, sturgeon liver, blue shark steak, tuna steak, squid stew, and five kinds of roe—shad roe, cod roe, mackerel roe, hering roe and yellow-pink roe."

Mitchell also became more and more willing to let his subjects speak for themselves. "I admire the imagery in vulgar conversation," he wrote. The one-liners he had cited previously often became pages of direct quotation recorded without any interjection from the author. His story, "The Gypsy Women", which is forty-five pages long, is made up almost entirely of a series of lectures on gypsies given by a retired police officer. Other characters, from the wily Commodore Dutch to the Bowery "celebrity" Mazie P. Gordon, filled the pages of Mitchell's work with their rambunctious monologues. Mitchell spent months trailing his subjects, taking the time to get every nuance of their talk into his notebook, often combining separate speeches to make one long monologue. He was not afraid to use the techniques of a novelist; one of his most famous characters, Mr. Flood, is a composite of several men he knew from the stalls of the Fulton Fish Market.

When Mitchell did pause or interrupt his subjects, it was usually to explain, to give histories and definitions. In "The

Rats on the Waterfront", he takes pains to describe not only the differences between brown rats, black rats and Alexandrian rats, but also to offer a chronology of the bubonic plague in the United States. In "The Rivermen", he gives a capsule history of Edgewater, New Jersey. "The Mohawks in High Steel", a story about the Indians who helped build New York's skyscrapers, is prefaced by an account of how members of the Caughnawaga tribe came to Brooklyn. Information is included not only to facilitate the story's telling, but also for the sake of its preservation. Mitchell wanted to record more than the lives of the idiosyncratic men and women he met; he wanted to convey the knowledge they had accumulated in the course of their lives. And what a diverse mélange of men and women there are in his books: gypsies, tramps, prodigal children, cave-dwellers, and a bearded lady, to name only a few. "The least interesting people to interview," he wrote, "...are the ones who probably should be the most interesting, industrial leaders, automobile manufacturers, Wall Street financiers, oil and steel czars, people like that. They either chew your ears off with nonsense about how they are self-made...or they sit around and look gloomy." He said that he would rather interview a waitress than a society woman: "The best talk is artless, the talk of people trying to reassure or comfort themselves..."

Mitchell admired Gogol, Brueghel and Posada, and like them, he was attracted to nature's anomalies—the misformed, the benighted, the cast-aside and the untouchable. There was never pity or condescension in his treatment of them, always

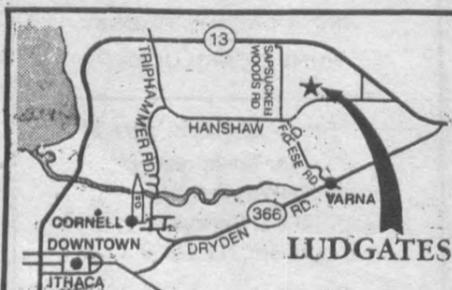
sympathy and humanity. In the Author's Note to *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*, he wrote, "The people in a number of these stories are of the kind that many writers have recently got in the habit of referring to as 'the little people.' I regard this phrase as patronizing and repulsive. There are no little people in this book. They are as big as you are, whoever you are."

Mitchell's books became more focused as his career progressed. They moved from being about a number of subjects (*My Ears are Bent*, *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*) to a primary subject (the waterfront in *The Bottom of the Harbor*) or a single character (Joe Gould in *Joe Gould's Secret*). Before Mitchell's death, there was a rumor that he was writing a biography of Ann Honeycutt, "a glamorous blond about town." But if he was, he never published a word of it. What is clear is that his long silence wasn't for lack of effort. According to *The New York Times*, janitors at *The New Yorker* would find "reams of copy" in the wastepaper basket in his office.

Roy Blount speculated that Mitchell was undone by the discovery that Gould, who claimed to be writing a multi-million-word book called *An Oral History of our Time*, was a charlatan and that his *History* did not exist. Mitchell's first story about Gould, "Professor Sea Gull", appeared in 1942, not long after he joined the staff of *The New Yorker*. *Joe Gould's Secret*, his last published work, appeared in 1964. Gould bookends the most important part of Mitchell's career. In "Professor Sea Gull", Gould says that his aim in *The Oral History* is to "put down the informal history of the shirt-sleeved multitude—what they had to say about their jobs, love affairs, vittles, sprees, scrapes and sorrows..." In the same story, Mitchell writes, "*The Oral History* is a great hodgepodge and kitchen midden of hearsay, a repository of jabber, an omniumgatherum of bushwa, gab, palaver, hogwash, flapoodle, and malarkey... (containing) the biographies of hundreds of bums, accounts of the wanderings of seamen encountered in South Street bar-rooms, grisly depictions of hospital and clinic experiences...summaries of innumerable Union Square and Columbus Circle harangues, testimonies given by converts at Salvation Army street meetings, and the added opinions of scores of park-bench oracles and gin-mill savants..."

Mitchell said of the people he profiled, "Just about everybody is me," and there is good reason to believe he felt a particular affinity for Gould. Neither Mitchell nor Gould was a native New Yorker, but both felt comfortable there. "In New York City," said Gould, "...I have always felt at home." Likewise Mitchell, who said he was drawn to the stalls of the Fulton Fish Market "because they reminded me of home." Gould was a charlatan, and Mitchell once said he thought of himself as "half a swindler." They were both storytellers concerned with oral history, and while the difference between them was that Mitchell was not only a good talker but a writer as well, in the end Mitchell's inability to produce made for an uncanny resemblance between the author and his subject.

Jon Michaud is a writer living in Brooklyn.



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

