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# the BOOKPRESS

THE NEWSPAPER OF THE LITERARY ARTS

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## Education.com

William Griffen

Ours is a civilization committed to the quest for continually improved means to carelessly examined ends.

—Robert K. Merton

About a half century ago, Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* observed that "rapid technological changes, taking place in a mass-producing economy and among a population predominantly propertyless, have always tended to produce economic and social confusion." In his prescient forward, Huxley predicted a gentler, kinder totalitarian state "in which the all-powerful executive of political bosses and their army of managers control a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced, because they love their servitude." He maintained that the "love their servitude" task would fall to "ministries of propaganda, newspaper editors and school teachers."

Orthodoxy sees technology as a progressive means to everything from the launch pad to a bigger and better future to the amelioration of human problems. Driving this view, now a powerful ideology, is the crass culture of ubiquitous consumerism. Scanning the past few years of *THE (Technological Horizons in Education)*, a popular technophile journal, one finds the recurrent theme: "Join the Revolution." Two seminal revolutionary philosophers, Al Gore and Bill Gates, are prominently quoted. Vice President Gore tells us, "In short, technology is revolutionizing our lives, our society, and our world. And we simply cannot afford to sleep through this revolution." Bill Gates adds, "[technology] will forever change the way we work, socialize, and shop. It will affect all of us and businesses of every type in ways far more pervasive than most people recognize." In answering the question "Can the web revolutionize education?," a few "exemplary websites" are cited. For news, the exemplary website is Pathfinder ([www.pathfinder.com](http://www.pathfinder.com)). And what limitless source of information is to be tapped here? — *Time*, Warner Brothers, *Sports Illustrated*, HBO, *Fortune*, *People*, Elektra Records, *Southern Living*, *Entertainment Weekly* and as they say in "dot com land" — more, much more. Hard to think of a more balanced list of sources for news and critical evaluation of the technological society. This typical cheer-leading pitch for technology in education closes with: "In all areas of the curriculum, teachers must teach an information-based inquiry process to meet the demands of the Communication Age. . . Meeting this challenge will be impossible unless educators are willing to join the revolution and embrace the new technology tools available." (emphasis added)

But alas, the "information-based" revolution has no content save more market growth. Rarely are problems of poverty, racism, violence, injustice, or ecocide discussed or even mentioned. "Means justifying means" discussions and endless techno-instrumentality

continued on page 2



Inside:

John Bowers reviews Geoffrey Hill's *Canaan*  
Kevin Murphy on *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*  
Poetry by Deborah Tall and Lyn Lifshin

# Education.com

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The following is my version of a high-tech presentation. It rarely surfaces on a website, unless, of course, you stumble across "Tax the Rich" on the World Wide Web—<http://www.webcom.com/ttr>

If each person in America's richest 1% has this much money:



Then people in the next 4% have this much:



And the rest of us have this much:

(Right here)

Type sizes are proportional to the actual wealth concentration by percentile.

excursions protect us from any reflection beyond the present market-growth, global capitalism goals.

Douglas Noble, in an article titled: "Mad Rushes into the Future: The Overselling of Educational Technology," (*Educational Leadership*, November 1996) warns that

getting schools to leap onto the Information Highway is just the latest in a series of corporate forays marked by ignorance, self-interest, and marketing madness.... This 'technology fever' sweeping the nation's executive suites and board rooms is not the result of new insights or widespread success in school technology use. Most observers agree that, despite promising experiments, the billions already spent on technology have not had a significant impact on school effectiveness.

Most social science scholarship implicitly accepts prevailing cultural assumptions and uncritically reproduces the private sector's agenda irregardless of education or political reforms. Scholarly work, despite the appearance of criticality and reflection, is tolerated only so long as it does not directly threaten public policy, and what Antonio Gramsci termed "hegemonic ideology" grinds on from generation to generation

In his *The Minimal Self*, Christopher Lasch wondered, "What if we reject the premise...that industrialism fosters political and economic progress?" Certainly economic evidence does not support this premise. We may all be traveling on one massive superhighway, but it has different lanes. In the fast lane, the richest 20% of the world's population take 85% of the world's income. In the mass lane, the poorest 20% receives 1.4% of the world's income, about \$1.00 a day per person. Most of the fast lane is filled with people from the United States, but even here only 1% of the population controls 39% of total household wealth and 48% of financial wealth. In the American mass lane, the bottom 90% own just 17% of the wealth. The average compensation of U.S. CEOs is \$2,100 an hour (1995) while factory workers average \$11.46 an hour (1995).

With the realization that the present system is working for the benefit of the few at the expense of the many, how does one think about the system's rush to technology? Some would argue that the technology must be used as a tool to democratize the social order. We must remind ourselves, however, that entrenched power will not knowingly contribute to its own demise. Further, as PTT professor Langdon Winner argues,

the technological society tends to arrange all situations of choice, judgment, or decision in such a way that only instrumental concerns have any true impact. In these situations questions of 'how' tend to overpower questions of 'why' so that the two matters become, for all practical purposes, indistinguishable. (*Autonomous Technology*, MIT Press, 1977)

What about a role for schools? Prior attempts come to mind. George Count's "Dare the School Build a New Social Order?" (1932), Theodore Brameld's work in social reconstructionism, and some of the 1960s empowerment experiments suggest a starting place. The focus should be on understanding the social, political and economic order, not the technology. More than any medley of largely irrelevant school reforms, what is called for is a 180° shift away from the partnerships-with-business sell-out of critical pedagogy. Educators must challenge the planners and technophiles who, despite the unequal and unfair outcomes of the present system, are committed to the training and socialization of a workforce that serves the corporate agenda. As Karl Polanyi pointed out, "normally, the economic order is merely a function of the social, in which it is contained. Neither under tribal, nor feudal, nor mercantile conditions was there...a separate economic system in society."

If it is assumed that work as a social enterprise is problematic and not a given, it becomes possible to think collectively about how "work" affects more than mere production rates and our nation's place in the global economy. Some ways of working are supportive of human growth and development (a major educational goal if not the major goal) and others are antithetical to that objective. Schools, to be truly educative instead of merely instrumentally vocational, should be leading the examination of work, and by extension the economic system, much as an anthropologist would.

The present mania for economic growth, the uncritical faith in technology, and the adversarial relationship we have struck with nature, all demand an intelligent response from our schools. Our attention should be directed toward nurturing students' independent thinking, providing them with the wherewithal to analyze the social implications of mere training to fill employers' marketplace needs.

The gospel as preached by Bill Gates and his acolytes is based on the totally unfounded assumption that the present economy is being

## Radical Theory Without Radical Action is Meaningless

To the Editor:

I would like to respond in a general way to John Vernon's review of *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* (February 1998). Given the very real crises facing the world today, I have to ask the obvious: Don't university professors have anything better to do? I for one am more alarmed by global warming, agribusiness, the monolithic media, working conditions in a service economy and the mindless dogmatism of both "left" and "right" in academia than by suspect ideological positions in literature. In my experience, intellectuals, artists and workers who are not part of the academic subculture find the culture wars to be ludicrous. Particularly amusing are the oxymorons spawned by this feud like "tenured radical" and "conservative revolution".

In my dealings with creative writers and students of culture I have been accused, sometimes in the same evening, of being a Romantic, a materialist, an idealist, an aesthete, a biological determinist and an elitist. I am always amazed at how these labels are thrown about without reference to what they mean and as if it were a crime to have a different point of view than one's culturally studious antagonist. In the name of tolerance they preach intolerance, in the name of political liberation they enforce monolithic ideological positions. Who are they? Dematerialized Marxists, Deconstructors, Language Poets, Campus Avant Gardists, Revolutionaries with summer homes, two cars and pension funds worth more than a Walmart sales "associate" can hope to earn in twenty years. The same of course can be said for conservatives, such as the late Allan Bloom and the lamentably vigorous William Bennett.

During the twenty year reign of the Left in English departments America has witnessed the return of the death penalty, successful attacks on affirmative action, the collapse of labor unions, plunging wages, widespread hunger and homelessness, the rise of the religious right and the victory of unbridled corporate power and its triumphant consumerism (an ideology based entirely on greed, and shared by almost everyone involved in this debate). This suggests to me a fundamental failure of the Left to stay relevant. Instead of creating alliances it has collapsed into identity politics, reinforcing the very bad idea that people's differences are more definitive than their similarities. Theory Inc's hostility towards science and predilection for ideological witch hunts has totally discredited it outside of academia. Instead of acknowledging that, from the standpoint of those in power, concentrating dissent in the academy is the best possible way to control it, they indulge in the hypocritical fantasy that they are carrying the banner of the revolution deep into enemy territory—the minds of the young and wealthy

Radical theory without radical action is meaningless. The person who throws out her credit cards, who doesn't drive a car or watch t.v. at least is doing something. Refusing to teach at a university that receives defense department money would be radical. When the Black Panthers fed children free breakfast, that was radical action. Changing a nineteen year old's reading habits is not. No one ever got gunned down or tear gassed for dissolving text into context. Revolutions are fought with weapons and pamphlets, not with incomprehensible essays notorious for their contentious jargon.

As for art, I have yet to encounter any as elitist as the Marxist criticism about it, which no reading of Marx could ever render clear. The aesthetic view of art and literature is rooted in experience. Denying the validity of this point of view and branding those who hold it as racist, homophobic(!), Eurocentric misogynists is idiotic. An aesthetic view of art is by no means inconsistent with a radical political ideology. But to know that, you would actually have to read some literature, instead of theorizing about it.

Jon Frankel, Ithaca New York

replaced by dynamic workplaces with increasing reliance on hi-tech workers. To be sure, some workplaces will move in that direction, but how many? Most? Are we to believe that the new breed of corporate players—CEOs, managers, symbolic analysts (Robert Reich's term), bankers, et.al. are going to suddenly oppose top-down managed workplaces and reject the deskilling of jobs even where profitable? More likely as education theorist Michael Apple argues, "what we will witness (as a result of tying school goals to the requirements of the corporations and the new technology) is the creation of enhanced jobs for a relative minority and deskilled and boring work for the majority."

In his book, *The Illusion of Choice*, Andrew Schmookler observes that the "main engine of our destructiveness (is) the insatiable materialism of our civilization...the

(market) system is also our master. So long as we buy into the illusion that our systems are allowing us to choose our destiny, we will be trapped in our complacency. The first step in our liberation is to recognize our bondage."

As our obsession with means over ends, virtual reality over authentic being, and economic growth over environmental sanity accelerates, the need is clear. It is as simple as Paul Goodman's counsel years ago:

Ask what kind of world you want to live in. What are you good at and want to work at to build that world? What do you need to know? Demand that your teachers teach you that.

**William Griffen** is a professor of education at SUNY Cortland. He has been an activist for social justice for over forty years.

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# What is Art?

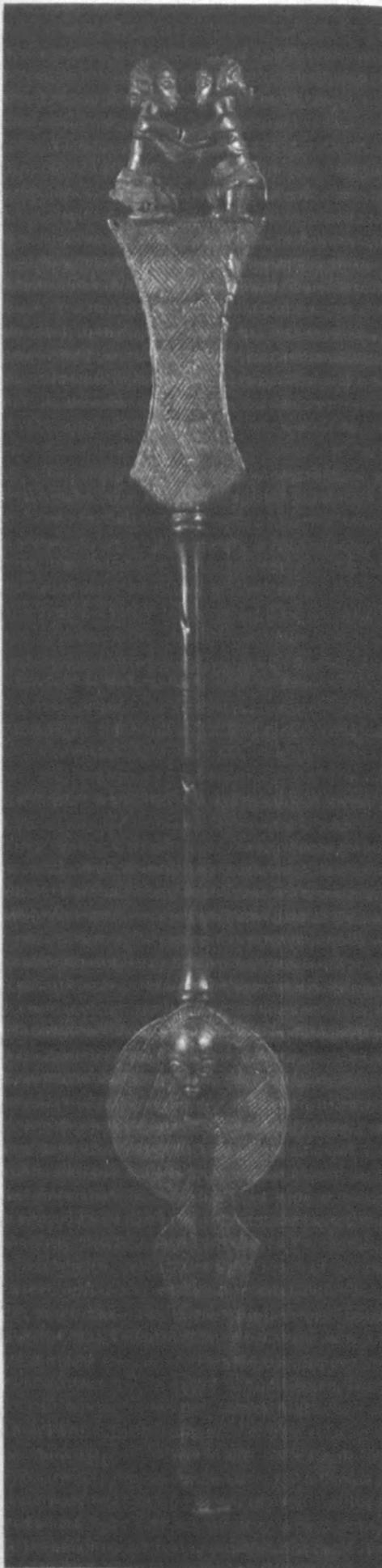
Kenneth Evett

For anyone interested in Tolstoy's problematical 19th-century question, recent exhibitions at the Albright Knox Museum in Buffalo provided a challenging opportunity for speculation on the subject.

The Albright has a solid reputation for its prescient advocacy of 20th century visual art. Most of the major figures of European and American modernism are represented there in a collection housed in a chaste minimal modern structure that may be seen as a symbolic foil for the adjacent neo-classical building of the complex. To further proclaim its status as an up-to-date museum, large non-objective metal sculptures adorn the area around the entrance. Inside, pure white rectangular walls form an environment for a collection that is more distinguished by the extent of its inclusions than for its quality, which ranges from mature paintings by Klee, Gauguin, and Picasso to the puerile "Two Musicians" by Matisse. But at least the collection does provide a comprehensive record of visual sensibility in our era. As in any exhibition of period work, constant and changing concepts commingle. The polar opposition of classicism and romanticism remains, while Renaissance conventions of unequivocal volumetric drawing and the delineation of deep space have been cast aside to be replaced by ambiguities of content and the practice of orienting spatial rhythms to the sacred flatness of the picture plane. The powerful influence of the formal and iconographic freedom of African Art is evident throughout the collection. By coincidence, a concurrent show at the gallery consisted of crafts and sculpture by the Luba natives of Zaire. Assembled from over fifty public and private collections by the Museum for African Art in New York City, this display seemed to me a revelation of high art.

I was so exhilarated by the grandeur of the work that I promptly bought an expensive catalogue, even though I know from past experience that such an acquisition is a poor substitute for the original longed-for but unavailable art object, and I was dubious about the title, *Memory, Luba Art and the Making of History*, since I believe that making art is more constructive than making history. But with this catalogue on hand for a further perusal of Luba culture, it became evident that these people lived in an environment of constant visual excitement. In their passion to give form and adornment to the ritual and domestic activities of life they achieved an organic balance between abstract geometry and indigenous found objects that reveals a society of great vigor and sweet humanity.

I know, of course, that art emerges from a nexus of environmental, economic, and societal influences; in this case the catalogue presents a convincing account of these aspects of Luba culture. I also know that status and one's "place in history" are of interest to the insecure of most societies, but when such limited preoccupations are tediously documented and then juxtaposed in the same book with photographs of magnificent visual art, the conflicting demands for attention are distracting. Furthermore, when items in an exhibition are poised against pure white walls and look black, but when photographed for a catalogue against a dark background, appear to be colorful, the discrepancy is evidence of the relative basis for making aesthetic judgments. Other catalogue photographs are simply informative. They present scenes of the Luba river and forest environment, images of the bodily configurations of the natives, shots of tribal rituals where the dust is flying, and where feathers, animal furs, beads and voluminous swaths of



Staff of Office. Luba, Zaire.

A number of iconographic features allow staffs to be read like sculptural maps. The female figures shown seated or standing at the summit of staffs, or carved in relief on their broad sections, represent the female founders of specific royal lines.

Reprinted with permission of the Museum for African Art.

cloth are whirling. These pictures even evoke sounds of stamping, singing, and odors of the wild action. In one photo a ceremonial participant is holding a sculptural masterpiece in his hand, a wooden staff with two carved female figures at the top and sequential intervals of geometric motifs and plain surfaces in the lower parts of the object. When such a creation is removed from its original function, carried away to a modern western city, placed in an immaculate lucite box, and sent on a tour of provincial American art museums, it is transformed into a aesthetic artifact that asserts its own distinctive power, especially when

seen in conjunction with our contemporary art forms.

Whereas western art in the 20th century has gone through paroxysms of change, and American artists since mid-century have engaged in a frenzied search for novelty, Luba art is naturally, comfortably traditional. Based on intimate human scale, it employs the universal abstract devices of symmetry and the vertical axis. These provide stability for changes of proportion or slight shifts to asymmetry that are dramatic, but instead of generating our Western sense of tension or angst, Luba art offers images of serenity, of harmony with nature and with other humans. It celebrates the joys of inventive decoration and displays the easy authority of expert craftsmanship. These African artists paid close attention to the world around them and were able to combine observed reality and abstraction into a seamless unity of expression. They recognized the importance of women and portrayed the elegant contours of their heads, brooding eyes, delicate chins, sexual parts, and their bodily scarifications as elements in a single, dignified, symbolic icon. Frequently the gestural function of such figures is to support the seat of a monarchical stool and in doing so they inadvertently assume the ancient orant posture of worship or the triumphant upraised arms of the victorious athlete. The human head is a potent motif for these artists. It appears in carved wooden staffs that are primarily intended to convey symbolic messages, but it also emerges in the flow of forms as a simple tribute to human beauty.

To come upon this wonderful exhibition of African art after a long bus ride to the Albright past miles of jerrybuilt housing developments, industrial power lines, abandoned factories, and the incessant traffic of the Buffalo area, then to be confronted at the museum entrance with large, soulless nonobjective American sculpture, followed by a gallery tour of 20th century western art, was an experience that convinced me that we still have something to learn from our fellow artists in Africa.

In the years that have elapsed since 1898, when Tolstoy's thoughtful, high-minded book of essays, *What Is Art?*, came out, there have been global wars, monstrous acts of human cruelty, and marvels of technological and scientific discoveries that were accompanied by revolutionary changes in the arts. The inevitable accommodation between innovative art forms and the American craving for novelty has been exploited by art entrepreneurs into an international business based on clever promotion and a calculated escalation of insanely high prices. In such a crass cultural milieu, Tolstoy's dogmatic assumption that art is a religious exercise and a moral force for human betterment seems irrelevant. And, as is often the case when professional writers discourse on art, Tolstoy was preoccupied with subject matter and consequently unaware of the abstract aspects of the visual arts.

However, he did proclaim the universality of art, and with that precept to back me up, I want to lay claim to a creative bond with the Luba artists of Zaire. Like them, I want to revere the mysterious life of forms and substance, and, like them, achieve a state of pure concentration on the relationships between one form and another, and, as they do, discover and delineate that reality and thus create an ineffable entity that just may be what art is.

Kenneth Evett, Emeritus Professor of Art at Cornell, recently exhibited an oil painting in the one hundred and seventy second members show at the National Academy of Design in New York City.

## Schadenfreude

There's no delight in standing  
behind my metal cart,  
the tedious wait to hand over coupons,

the week's last dollars to the cashier.

But to browse

*The Enquirer*, learn that the government's

Secret Alligator Man demolished  
the laboratory, killed  
a biologist, then scurried to the swamps,

perhaps at this moment floats  
surreptitiously  
toward pina colodas, a pontoon

full of lawyers, their amethyst  
wives, makes  
for a perverse, if only brief,

satisfaction. Like the humid  
summer evening  
in the park, bullheaded Patty Minx

kicked the winning goal into the net  
for the opposing  
team, the day Bob Tankenburg,

fast to boast about his Porsche,  
was nabbed  
doing fifty-six down Main,

his license on the bureau by his bed.

When the Mormons'  
proposal for a new church was bounced,

Presbyterian elders chuckled to themselves,  
then launched  
an impromptu membership drive,

targeted angry parishioners  
in Smith's flock.  
Some people repudiate Schadenfreude,

say it doesn't exist, or if it does  
only in rare cases,  
the grumbings of the cynic, the misanthrope.

But we know better, realize  
how it whirlpools  
our coffee, stains our tongues—

the cold, blunt smile, the black snicker,  
a sudden  
bright tickle we feel as retrieving

the mail from our box we notice  
the lazy  
neighbor's mutt has shit on the meticulous

neighbor's lawn, that it's not our mother,  
outspoken, arthritic,  
who must now live with us, not

our tractor in the ditch, our furnace  
on the porch.  
If it wasn't for the chance,

here and then, to take pleasure  
in the misfortunes  
of others, to follow our impulse

to Schadenfreude our banker, our boss,  
the obnoxious kid  
suspended from school, how else

could we cope in this place  
where we go  
paycheck to paycheck, improvising

what we have, yes,  
how else  
would we come to understand

the difference between bad luck and fool.

—Thom Ward

Thom Ward teaches poetry workshops in Rochester, NY primary and secondary schools. His poems have appeared in many journals, newspapers and anthologies. He and his wife live in Palmyra, NY with their three children.

Off Campus

# At The Bookery

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

Saturday, March 7, 8:00 p.m.

## International Women's Day

For the second annual celebration of International Women's Day, the Durland Alternatives Library and The Bookery are co-sponsoring an event featuring works by women writers from a variety of countries and backgrounds. Stories and poems will be read by an "international cast" of women.

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



### Dennis Williams

*Somebody's Child*, the new novel by the author of *Crossover* (1992), resonates with particular meaning in post-Million Man March America. It explores, from an African-American perspective, two enduring questions: How do people become a family? And how does a man become a father?

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

### Moncrieff & Eva Cochran

Child care is a critical need for many of today's parents. But finding a child care provider who can support your child's particular needs can be a stressful process. In *Child Care That Works*, husband-and-wife team Moncrieff & Eva Cochran, who between them have more than fifty years of child care experience, discuss the myriad considerations and practical solutions to child care in the 90s.

Saturday, April 4, 4:00 p.m.

### Women's Studies Conference

Poet, novelist, and essayist Meena Alexander will speak at The Bookery as part of a three-day conference called "Genders and Nations: Reflections on Women in Revolution" co-sponsored by the Women's Studies and the Gender and Global Change Program at Cornell.

Sunday April 5, 4:00 p.m.



### Prartho

In her book, *Everyday Miracles*, made up of twenty-six evocative stories, one for each letter of the alphabet, Prartho—a student of the Neo-Zen Master Osho, single mother, and counselor/psychologist—explores the miraculous in ordinary life and inspires us to discover the daily wonders in our own lives. Once a Cornell instructor, Prartho now writes and paints in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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## Three Flowers

### Toadshade

Not for its broad triplets of fleshy leaves and short, erect bud unfolding to a ragged star on the wood's floor; think, instead, of its propensity for moist and shady places, where small acts of violence may be safely hidden.

Its polite name is trillium.

### Sky Lupine

Favors weak and stony upland soils. A widespread root system generally keeps this slender plant secure from rising into the egg-thin, blue horizon.

### Vipers Bugloss

Alien. A bristly plant with short, claw-like stems, each bearing a single bloom; colonising roadsides and waste places. of the family: Forget-me-not..

—Philip Holmes



Ethel Hella-Vrana

Philip Holmes lived in Ithaca for seventeen years. In 1994 he moved to Princeton, where he teaches applied mathematics and mechanics. He has published three collections of verse, the most recent being *The Green Road* (Anvil Press).

### A Final Poem for Father

Sunday morning dawn in the city of my birth, the white domino tombstones stretching in lines all around me in the green hillside, the stones standing though the dead beneath push up this years soldiers of April

And you, whose brain failed years before your peasant's body, I have come to visit, to harp at your wasted life, your pugilist's sense of justice, your idiots trust in the human mind, your New York body returned to Minnesota dust, your howitzer voice to a jagged memory.

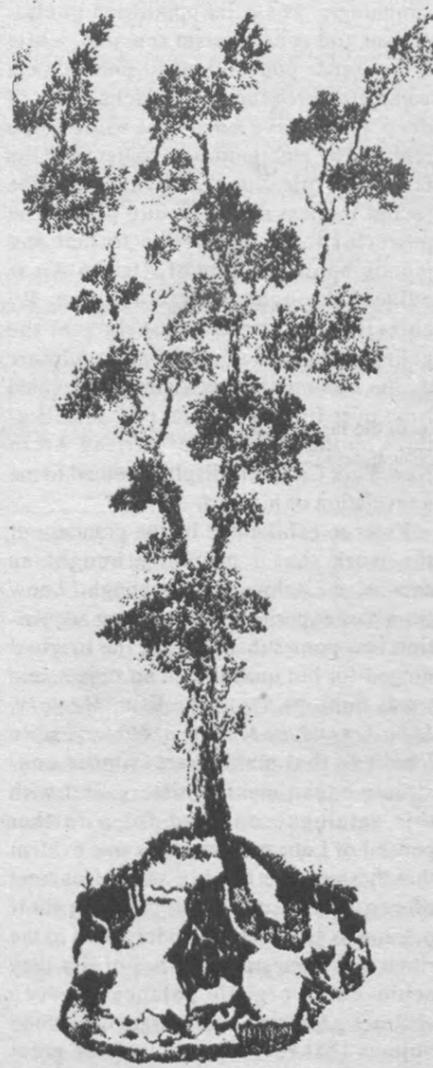
Only your laughter, head thrown back, face reddening in roaring delight, recalled with something like pleasure.

Oh, father, when you roll from this grave, squalling new toward another turn of the wheel, Arthur the dream beneath life's dream, becoming, again, a fool seeking wisdom through repeated folly, take only your laughter with you.

It may be enough.

—Jack Williams

Jack Williams is a writer and editor who lives in Ithaca.



Mike Finn

## Don't Forget

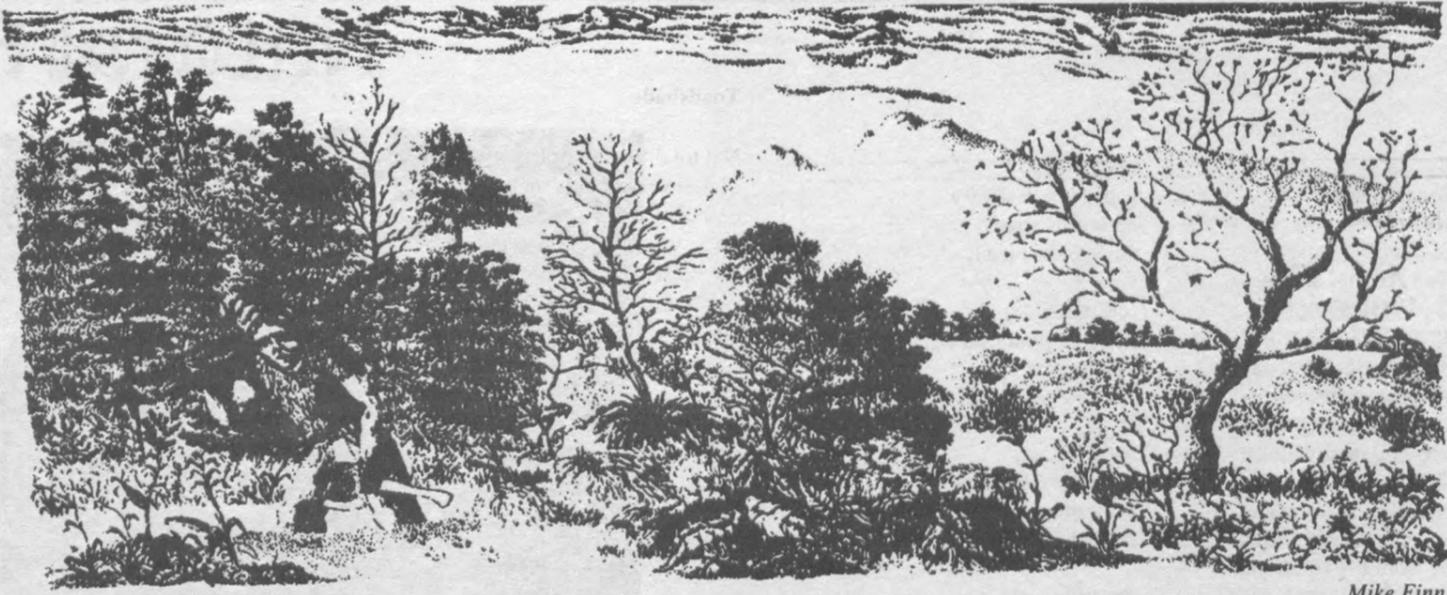
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Mike Finn

## Remembering the Day I Gave Birth to a Daughter

(in the story-telling rhythm of Pan-sori\*)

As I open the mirror and enter,  
 my mother is seated inside the mirror, and  
 as I open the mirror and enter again,  
 mother's mother is seated inside that mirror, and  
 as I push the mirror where mother's mother sits, and cross the threshold,  
 mother's mother's mother grins in the mirror, and  
 as I poke my head through the grinning lips of my mother's mother's mother,  
 inside that mirror, my mother's mother's mother's mother is seated looking  
 younger than me,  
 with her back turned toward me, and  
 as I open that mirror and enter,  
 and enter again,  
 yet enter once more,  
 inside the mirror growing darker and darker  
 all mothers of the ancestral line sit and  
 all the mothers, they leap at me  
 murmuring or yelping, mommy, mommy,  
 crying out for milk with their lips puckered up, but  
 my breasts run dry, and instead, somebody keeps  
 blowing air into my intestines and  
 my belly swells up larger than a balloon  
 and so it floats and wafts here and there on the sea, and  
 inside the mirror, it's so very wide and vast that  
 I can't find even a straw to hold onto, and  
 from time to time, lightning flashes through my body, and  
 every time I dive into the sea,  
 on the floor at the bottom of the sea, melting  
 are the shoes of all the mothers in tranquillity, yet,  
 lightning from a clear sky.  
 Lights out. Darkness in heaven and earth.  
 At that moment, the mirrors collapse before me, all at once, and  
 as they break, they spew out one mother and  
 many people in white, with gloved hands,  
 remove the debris of mirrors and lift up  
 the mother of all my mothers, blood-stained and with her eyes shut,  
 and say, it's a princess with ten fingers!

—Kim Hye-sun  
 (translated by Jiwon Shin)

*Translator's note - originating in eighteenth century Korea, Pan-sori is a dramatic performance accompanied by singing and drum beats.*

## In Transit

Your home, now behind me.  
 I live outside, farther out  
 in the rural reaches.  
 Flatbed trucks  
 roll in hourly  
 from Wilseyville  
 through temporal distances;  
 Imminent haying.  
 The tetherless trolley  
 still frames the horizon;  
 a long-held promise  
 to renew.

Tracks abandoned, embedded  
 in the treeline, edging  
 the fields between us.  
 From the valley,  
 the train's rhythm rises  
 its single-toned whistle  
 sounds and resounds,  
 now  
 as in the last century.  
 Voices on the train,  
 hat boxes,  
 smoking compartments,  
 clattering over  
 the Iroquois path.

—Ingrid Arnesen

## Suzy Sprawled on the Floor

outside the jazz studio.  
 On her belly with colored  
 pens. She could be 11 or  
 even younger. Doesn't want

to be in her father's house  
 with his "do this orders."  
 Simon says she draws in  
 12 cartoons. Simon says

this and "don't hit,  
 don't belt or strangle." Act your age  
 a gnome in her drawing  
 says to a fat lady who

belches "I just want to  
 entertain you," as the dog  
 barks off the page and the  
 one who's been asking over

and over: "who the hell  
 this Simon is" shakes and  
 hunches shoulders to "This  
 can't be that Simon guy,

he doesn't say much of  
 anything."

—Lyn Lifshin

*Lyn Lifshin has written more than 90 books and chapbooks of poetry, most recently Blue Tattoo, Poems of the Holocaust published by Event Horizon.*

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# Natural Strange Beatitudes



Canaan  
Geoffrey Hill  
Houghton Mifflin Company  
76 pages, \$22.00 cloth

## John Bowers

There is no poet writing in English today with a greater density of texture than Geoffrey Hill; there is also no poet writing today whose work is more hedged around with the apparatus of scholarship: footnotes, epigraphs, obscure references, archaic and foreign words, Latin tags, and the like. Hill's virtues are inseparable from his vices, his power inextricably intertwined with his obscurity. Next to lines of limpid grace and intensity are lines almost impossible to parse. The effect is similar to that of reading a text in a dead language: much of it is opaque, difficult to understand, but occasionally a line, a verse paragraph, or an entire poem stands out, clear and strong, like a ray of light emerging from a dark cloud.

The effect is magnified in *Canaan*, a sustained jeremiad against the violence, depravity and misrule of the century about to end that seems to bear the entire weight of history on its shoulders. Like the Old Testament prophets to whom he alludes, Hill thunders out warnings and lamentations, cries out for justice for the innocents and martyrs of history, and meditates on the possible sources of strength and virtue in a world seemingly abandoned by God. Calling upon the heroes and visionaries of the past—Churchill, Von Haeften, Cobbett, Blok, Law, Blake, and others—he describes *The strident high/civic trumpeting/of misrule* ("Respublica"), castigates the *slither/frisk/to lordship of a kind/as rats to a bird-table* ("To the High Court of Parliament," p.1), caustically enjoins us to *privatize to the dead/her* [England's] *memory:/let her wounds weep/into the lens of oblivion* (ibid.), and asks *Who can now speak for despoiled merit/the fouled catchments of Demos/as 'thy' high lamp* [i.e. Barry's and Pugin's *grand/dark-lantern above the incumbent Thames*] *presides with sovereign/equity, over against us, across this/densely reflective, long-drawn, procession of waters?* ("To the High Court of Parliament," p. 72). The first sonnet of a sequence in memory of Hans-Bernd von Haeften, one of the members of the German Resistance hanged by the Nazis, ends with the question: *Could none predict these haughty degradations/as now your high-strung/martyred resistance serves/to consecrate the liberties of Maastricht?*, while the fourth declares scathingly: *To the high-minded/base-metal forgers of this common Europe./community of parody, you stand ec/centric as a prophet.*

Yet Hill's vision is not entirely bleak. "Respublica" ends with the following quatrain:

*and destroyed hope  
that so many times  
is brought with triumph  
back from the dead.*

A muted optimism seems to inform the beginning of the third poem entitled "Mysticism and Democracy" (p. 71):

*Great gifts foreclosed on; loss and waste offset  
by thrifty oddities of survival—  
dittander and black saltwort that are found  
flourishing on the midland brine.  
Flesh has its own spirit, confused with torpor,  
deeper than most rooted faiths, deeper than  
Passchendaele.*

and at times, as in part II of "Churchill's Funeral," this note rises and swells into something close to a testament of faith:

*uncanny wraith  
kindled afar-off  
like the evening star,  
res publica*

*seen by itself  
with its whole shining  
history discerned  
through shining air,*

*both origin  
and consequence, its  
hierarchies of sorts,  
fierce tea-making*

*in time of war,  
courage and kindness  
as the marvel is  
the common tool*

*that will always,  
simply as of right,  
keep faith, ignorant  
of right or fear:*

*who is to judge  
who can judge of this?  
Maestros of the world  
not you not them.*

There is no contradiction between these apparently opposite tendencies because for Hill history is cyclic. The second poem with the title "To the High Court of Parliament" (p. 51) is headed by a reference to Amos in which it is prophesied that Israel will be surrounded by an enemy and stripped of its strength. The poem starts with the following quatrains:

*Keep what in repair?  
Or place what further  
toll on the cyclic  
agony of empire?*

*Judgment and mourning  
come round yet again  
like a festival  
of scratched heroic film.*

and ends with the lines: the voice of Amos/past its own enduring, implying that the punishment prophesied for Israel will in turn be visited upon the present-day empire. The cyclic nature of human history is mirrored in the very structure of the volume itself, in which different poems with the same title recur again and again. The book begins and ends with "To the High Court of Parliament," with another occurrence in the middle; the title "Mysticism and Democracy" recurs five times; the title "Dark-Land" also recurs three times; there are three poems to individuals (William Cobbett, John Constable and William Law) with the common subtitle "In Absentia"; and there are two poems with the title "Parentalia." Furthermore, approximately midway through there occurs the beautiful poem "Cycle," one of the few in the volume that are purely lyrical. This poem is divided into five sections, the first of which describes the progression in which trees leaf out in spring:

I  
*Natural strange beatitudes*  
*the leafless*  
*tints*  
*of spring touch red through brimstone*  
*what do you mean* *praise and*  
*lament*  
*it is the willow*  
*first then*  
*larch or alder*

The following sections introduce new themes corresponding to the succession of the seasons; and then, in the fifth section, the same themes as in the first section are reintroduced, this time in reverse order:

*Larch or alder*  
*first*  
*then willow*  
*leafless tints*  
*of spring touch red through brimstone*

*praise and lament*  
*praise and lament*

*what do you mean* *praise*  
*lament*  
*praise and lament*  
*what do you mean*  
*do you mean*  
*beatitudes*

Thus the natural cyclic movement of the seasons and the corresponding movement of spiritual life are instantiated into the very structure of the poem itself. This poem, standing as it does at the center of the volume, is itself emblematic of the larger cycles into which human history is organized, while they in turn are instantiated into the cyclic structure of the entire volume.

In "Cycle" and other poems in *Canaan*, Hill effectively expands the use of typographic devices introduced in certain of his earlier poems, most extensively in "The Pentecost Castle," to mark cadences in an explicit fashion.

By suppressing most of the marks of punctuation such as commas, periods, question marks, etc., that serve as guides to the syntactic and rhetorical structure of the text and by expanding the use of spacing and indentation, Hill forces the reader to focus attention on the sequence of cadences that constitute the rhythmic structure of the poem, giving it an incantatory force that would otherwise be far less evident. Though Hill's meters are by and large iambic, the cadential structure indicated in this way superimposes a new rhythmic dimension on these poems, one that is reminiscent in certain ways of Pound's practice in the *Cantos*.

In other respects, however, the poems in *Canaan* are much freer in structure and much less tightly organized than in most of his previous work. This is due mainly to the complete absence of end rhyme (or even partial rhyme) and to a much greater variation in line length. Though the freedom of movement gained thereby is used effectively in many places, it also permits Hill to lapse at times into a flaccid, prosy style verging on the aca-

dem. Quite a number of these poems have stanzas of fourteen or seven lines. The former are thus basically unrhymed sonnets with lines of irregular length, while the latter might be regarded as half-sonnets. The sequence of eight poems constituting "De Jure Belli Ac Pacis," as for example number III, are all free sonnets of this kind:

*You foretold us, hazarding the proscribed  
tongue  
of piety and shame; plain righteousness  
committed with much else to Kreisau's bees  
for their particular keeping. We might have  
kept  
your Christian inhibitions—faithful, nonju-  
rant,  
in the singing-court of dread  
at the grid of extor-  
tion—  
but chose pity. This pity is shameful  
unlike memory, though both can draw  
sugar from iron.  
Pity, alone with its rage,*

*settles on multitudes  
as the phoenix sought  
from a hundred cities tribute of reguiting  
flame.*

To me, this poem and a number of others in a similar mode are pretty low-voltage. Try as I might to read it as either metrical or cadenced verse, it comes out sounding more like awkward prose. Such poems seem to fall between two stools. On the one hand, the line ends are not strongly marked enough and the line lengths are too varied, for them to be read as blank verse. On the other hand, the typographically marked cadences are neither strong enough nor numerous enough for them to be read as fully cadenced verse. Many of these poems also have a flat, didactic flavor that contrasts sharply with the finest ones in the volume—poems such as "Cycle," "Of Coming Into Being and Passing Away," "To the Nieuport Scout," "Parentalia" ("The here-andnow finds vigil..."), "Sorrel," "Pisgah," and a number of others.

At the same time, it must be said that in quite a few of these poems Hill does successfully combine cadenced verse with an underlying iambic sonnet form to produce a unique and beautifully nuanced hybrid form. An example is the poem "That Man as a Rational Animal Desires the Knowledge Which Is His Perfection":

*Abiding provenance I would have said  
the question stands*  
*even in adoration*  
*clause upon clause*  
*with or without assent*  
*reason and desire on the same loop—  
I imagine singing I imagine  
getting it right—the knowledge  
of sensuous intelligence*  
*entering into the work—  
spontaneous happiness as it was once  
given our sleeping nature to awake by*  
*and know*  
*innocence of first inscription*

Particularly noteworthy is the way that the

syntactic phrasing (together with the repetition of the verb *imagine*) is counterpointed against both meter and cadence in the seventh and eight lines, so that the object of the second instance of *imagine* is withheld not only across a line break but across a stanza break as well, thus subtly and forcefully emphasizing getting it right—making it in fact the focus of the whole first stanza and at the same time forcing us to interpret this phrase ambiguously in such a way that it refers not only to the abstract virtue of 'getting things right' but reflexively to the very art by means of which our attention was drawn to it. Similarly, notice the way that the conjunction of phrases to awake by/and know is broken up and counterpointed against the cadences imposed by the antepenultimate and penultimate lines. At the same time, the phrase and know, which is crucial to the argument of the poem, is emphasized by being given equal weight with the long pentameter line preceding it and the final tetrameter line. Balanced like a pivot between the preceding line which engenders it and its own object, the triumphant final phrase *innocence of first inscription*, the verb *know*, together with its sister phrase *getting it right*, is thrust, both semantically and rhythmically, into high relief as the focal point of the entire poem. And, as if this were not enough, note that the metrically and linguistically stressed word *know* is placed into further prominence by virtue of its contrast with the two phrases it is sandwiched between, both of which end in unstressed syllables: *awake by* and *inscription*.

As in his previous work, Hill is a master of a kind of word repetition that makes poetic use of the fact that the same word may vary subtly in meaning according to the contexts in which it appears. In another variant of this technique, words that might appear to be contradictory in meaning are used in contexts that make it clear that they are logically compatible. Both of these techniques are used in immediate succession, for example, in the lovely final stanza of "Of Coming Into Being and Passing Away":

*but by occasion  
visions of truth or dream  
as they arise—*  
*to terms of grace*  
*where grace has surprised us—  
the unsustaining*  
*wondrously sustained*

Similarly, consider the subtle effect of the cadenced repetition of *incredible* (a word incredibly difficult to use in a non-hackneyed way, incidentally) in the first quatrain of "To the Nieuport Scout":

*How swiftly they cease to be  
incredible*  
*how incredible*  
*the sudden immortals—*

Likewise, no one but Hill could have used to such dramatically ironic effect the play on the different senses of the words *hang* and *hanged* in the first two lines of part IV of "De Jure Belli Ac Pacis":

*In Plotensee where you were hanged  
they now hang  
tokens of reparation and in good faith  
compound with Cicero's maxims, Schiller's  
chant,  
your silenced verities.*

And notice once again the masterful way in which the contrast between the long first line and the short second line, both of which have equal cadential value, is used to subtly reinforce the semantic contrast between the two words.

Here and there in this volume are examples of word-music so wondrously complex as to approach the miraculous. Consider, for example, the second half of part I of the

*continued on page 11*

Neil Berger

# 154 Ways of Looking

The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets  
Helen Vendler  
Harvard University Press  
\$35.00, 650 pages

## Kevin Murphy

W. H. Auden, in his introduction to a 1972 edition of Shakespeare's sonnets, summed up the then-state of scholarship and criticism as follows:

Probably, more nonsense has been talked and written, more intellectual and emotional energy expended in vain, on the sonnets of Shakespeare than on any other literary work in the world. Indeed, they have become the best touchstone I know of for distinguishing the sheep from the goats, that is, those who love poetry for its own sake and understand its nature from those who value poems only either as historical documents or because they express feelings or beliefs of which the reader happens to approve.<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to say some not very kind words about the "goats of idle curiosity," that is, those people who read the sonnets to discover what they can about Shakespeare's personal life, an activity he compares to opening someone else's mail. On the other hand, he doesn't have much better things to say about the "goats of ideology" who have read the sonnets in such a way as to avoid or deflect the full impact of passionate devotion contained in them, or who have neglected to acknowledge that the passion depicted therein is directed at both a young man and a woman.

Since Auden's essay, there have been several comprehensive editions of the *Sonnets* which have moved well beyond his criticisms, but the *Sonnets* themselves continue to be a site of critical contention.<sup>2</sup> The English Renaissance, or the Early Modern Period as it is now known, has been a fertile ground for a variety of innovative critical approaches, with New Historicism leading the field, and the *Sonnets* have attracted an array of psychoanalytic, sociopsychological, and semantic studies, all of which place the poems in broad social contexts. These different approaches to the literature of the period, and to the *Sonnets* in particular, have at times pitted, at least at the level of methodology, contextual analysis against more traditional "close reading" (what used to be known as New Criticism), much to the traditionalists' disadvantage. With the appearance of Helen Vendler's *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, however, the focus of attention clearly, and perhaps definitively, shifts back to the poems themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Helen Vendler, who is the A. Kingsley Porter University Professor at Harvard, is best known for her reviews of contemporary poetry which regularly appear in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The New Republic*. Her criticism, both positive and negative, has provoked controversy in different circles (She has, on the one hand, described Sharon Olds' poetry as "pornographic" and Philip Levine's as "gushing," while, on the other, she has consistently forwarded, much to the puzzlement of other poets, the poetry of Jorie Graham). Regardless of the direction of the criticism, though, there is no question as to Vendler's power in shaping contemporary poetic opinion (At one point a *New York Times* caricature portrayed her as a head on a tank). But she has also written books on the drama of William Butler Yeats and the poetry of Wallace Stevens and George Herbert. In addition, in what proved to be a tour de force of close analysis, she

wrote an entire volume on the six odes of John Keats, a book she considers her favorite work to date.

Extending the method of analysis in the Keats volume, Vendler here, after providing a 41-page introductory essay, presents the text of each of the 154 sonnets of Shakespeare, first reprinting the 1609 Quarto text, and beneath placing a modern version. Opposite each sonnet, she provides a "mini-essay" for each poem (there is a combined essay for sonnets 153 and 154), one which proposes to examine the sonnet as an "aesthetic" entity. The bulk of the volume, then, is over 600 pages of poetic text and commentary, a daunting prospect. As Vendler herself cautions, "Of course, this Commentary is not intended to

"The self-lacerating intelligence in the later sonnets produces a voice so undeceived about reality and himself that the reader admires the clarity of mind that can lie so freely while acknowledging the truth."

be read straight through. I think of it as a work that those interested in the *Sonnets*, or students of the lyric, or poets hungry for resource, may want to browse in."

The modesty of this disclaimer, however, downplays the reach and the engagement of the book. In her acknowledgments she lists her teachers of poetry throughout her intellectual formation, from Sister Marie Barry, her first teacher of poetry at Emmanuel College, to I. A. Richards and John Kelleher, her mentors when she was a graduate student at Harvard. More poignantly, she recounts her first exposure to the poems:

My mother was the first person to introduce me to Shakespeare's sonnets. She quoted them often, and had memorized many of them. Her last pieces of writing (which we found after Alzheimer's disease had robbed her of memory) were fragments of the *Sonnets* which, either from fear of forgetting or as a means of self-assurance, she had written down on scraps of paper. It is no mean tribute to the *Sonnets* that they, of the hundreds of poems she knew by heart, were the last to fade.

In the course of writing the commentaries, Vendler memorized all 154 poems, or, as she says more tellingly, "I found it necessary to learn the *Sonnets* by heart." As her introductory essay makes clear, Vendler intends to defend vigorously not only her particular approach to the reading of the sonnets but also her understanding of lyric poetry in general. Vendler has spent a lifetime with these poems, and these analyses constitute nothing less than a personal and professional apologia.

At the outset of her introductory essay, then, she indicates her dissatisfaction with current approaches to the sonnets, and, in doing so, points to the salient assumptions of her own criticism:

Contemporary emphasis on the participation of literature in a social matrix balks at acknowledging how lyric, though it may refer to the social, remains the genre that directs its *mimesis* toward the performance of the mind in *solitary* speech. Because lyric is intended to be voiceable by anyone reading it, in its normative form it deliberately strips away most social specification (age, regional location, sex, class, even race).

This solitariness is crucial: the speaker's words are not meant to be "overheard" by a reader (as suggested by John Stuart Mill

and T. S. Eliot); moreover, the speaker's imagined addressee "can by definition never be present." Vendler insists, "Lyric can present no 'other' as alive and listening or responding in the same room as the solitary speaker." For Vendler, the lyric presents a kind of Emersonian Soul momentarily withdrawn from the restraints of social distortion and definition, and therefore free to articulate sentiments of a more universal character.

Further, not only does the lyric free the speaker from identification by sex, class, or race, but it also contains and requires a relationship with its reader which distinguishes the lyric from drama and fiction. As she says,

The act of the lyric is to offer a reader a script to say....While the social genres "build in" the reader

the architecture. You speak from inside the poem as someone looking to see how the roof articulates with the walls and the wall articulates with the floor. And where are the cross-beams that hold it up, and where are the windows that let light through?<sup>5</sup>

In line with this writerly stance or perspective, Vendler wishes to ask of Shakespeare's sonnets the two questions that W. H. Auden in *The Dyer's Hand* said interested him in reading any poem (The choice of Auden is doubly appropriate, not only because he excelled as both poet and critic but also because his title comes from Sonnet 111—"My nature is subdued/ To what it works in, like the dyer's hand"). For Auden, a poem is first of all a "verbal contraption,"

as either as listener (to the narrator of a novel) or as audience (to a play), the private literary genres—such as the Psalms, or prayers printed in prayer books, or secular lyrics—are scripted for repeated personal recitation. One is to utter them as one's own words, not as the words of another.

This equation, at least in terms of genre, of Psalms, prayers, and secular lyrics is revealing. Vendler approaches lyric poetry with, if not a religious, at least a devout sensibility.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of the *Sonnets* themselves, Vendler says that she regards her own writing "as part of a long collaborative effort to take the measure of Shakespeare—an effort that shows no sign of waning." She acknowledges a range of interpretations, from the psychoanalytic to the historical, paying particular gratitude to Stephen Booth's edition of the *Sonnets* with its rich emphasis on Shakespeare's language. Still, Vendler finds Booth wanting ("Booth gives up too easily on interpretation"), and, in spelling out her disagreement, presents the axiom of her own critical method:

But any respectable account of a poem ought to have considered its chief formal features. A set of remarks on a poem which would be equally true of a prose paraphrase of that poem is not, by my standards, interpretation at all. Commentary on the propositional content of a poem is something entirely different from the interpretation of a poem, which must take into account the poem's linguistic strategies as well as its propositional statements.

This of course goes to the heart of "close reading," a term that Vendler doesn't like (As Richard Howard has pointed out, it implies there might be such a thing as a faraway reading). She much prefers to consider herself approaching poetry "from the point of view of the writer." As she has said elsewhere:

It's a view from the inside, not from the outside. The phrase "close reading" sounds as if you're looking at the text with a microscope from outside, but I would rather think of a close reader as someone who goes inside a room and describes

4 Vendler, when asked directly by Henri Cole in a *Paris Review* interview, described herself as an atheist with no belief in an afterlife. On the other hand, when he asked her if she believed in the existence of souls, Vendler noted the interdependence of body and soul: "We have a very highly organized nervous system, which when it works well is something that we refer to as the soul." "The Art of Criticism III," *The Paris Review* (Winter 1996)

and the initial question he puts to it is "How does it work?" Once that technical perspective is established, he will then move on to the second, more broad array of moral issues and questions which frequently constitute the starting point of most interpretative modes.

But this distinction (and interrelation) between the technical and the moral implications of the poem is crucial. As Vendler says, "Like any poet, Auden knows that the second question cannot be responded to correctly until the first has been answered. It is the workings of the verbal construct that give evidence of the moral stance of the poet." Vendler goes to state the central justification of both her method and her subsequent analyses:

I believe that the deepest insights into the moral world of the poem, and into its constructive and deconstructive energies, comes precisely from understanding it as a contraption made of "words," by which I mean not only the semantic units we call "words" but all the language games in which the words can participate. Because many essays on the sonnets attempt moral and ethical discussion without any close understanding of how the poems are put together, I have emphasized in this Commentary the total "contraptionness" of any given sonnet as the first necessary level of understanding.

This prioritizing of form over content, or more accurately, this fusion of the two, is at the heart of Vendler's criticism.

Beyond this central issue, Vendler will not address or explore many of the issues which have sidetracked earlier commentators. She will not, for example, concern herself with a search for the biographical origins of the *Sonnets*. She will distinguish between Shakespeare the author and the fictive self whom she names as the speaker of the sonnets, but acknowledges that at times the two are "designedly blurred," since the person speaking in the sonnets is also an author. In addition, "in the interest of common sense," she has decided to hold to the convention that "assumes that the order of the sonnets as we have them is Shakespearean."

What Vendler will concern herself with, though, as she turns to the individual sonnets, is Shakespeare's "wonderful fertility in structural complexity." The Shakespearean sonnet form, though not invented by Shakespeare, is "manipulated by him in ways

5 "The Art of Criticism III," *The Paris Review*, 190.

1 *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (1972), 1722.

2 See, for example, Stephen Booth's *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1977), John Kerrigan's "The Sonnets" and "A Lover's Complaint" (1986), and more recently G. B. Evans's *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1996). Katherine Duncan-Jones has also edited the new Arden edition of the Sonnets which has just been released.

3 For a range of these textual and contextual approaches, see, for example, *Shakespeare Reread*, ed. Russ MacDonald (1994). For a more comprehensive review of recent Shakespeare scholarship and criticism, see Vendler's "Works Consulted," which runs 11 pages.

# at a Sonnet

unknown to his predecessors." Its four-part form (three isomorphic quatrains and an anomalous couplet) offers a greater variety of permutation and possibility than does the two-part Petrarchan form, and Shakespeare's manipulation of the logical relationships between these parts is parallel to "an evolving inner emotional dynamic" in the mind of the fictive speaker of each poem. As Vendler says, "The crucial rule of thumb in understanding any lyric is that every significant change in linguistic pattern represents a motivated change in feeling in the speaker."

Moreover, as Vendler explores the manner in which the various compositional strategies reveal and clarify the mental processes of the speaker, that character is given "realness" and "depth" of character as each sonnet contributes to an incremental "thick description" of this mind in emotional and intellectual transfiguration. From one perspective, then, the poems present, à la Wallace Stevens, 154 ways of looking at a sonnet; from another, their sum is to be understood as greater than the individual parts. As she says, "Shakespeare's speaker, alone with his thoughts, is the greatest achievement, imaginatively speaking, of the sequence."

When Vendler approaches the individual poems, some of the changes in linguistic pattern that she points to throughout the *Sonnets* can be very technical. She proposes, for example, what she calls a "Couplet Tie," in which the significant words from the body of each sonnet are repeated in the couplet. Tracing these words throughout each sonnet illuminates "how the same words take on different emotional import as the poem progresses." Frequently, too, Vendler provides a diagram sketching the particular shift in rhetoric, semantics, or image occurring throughout the sonnet at hand, a device that can prove, as one reads through the essays, to be as irritating as it is illuminating.

But what Vendler calls the "strategies of unfolding" within each poem is most intriguing and varies widely among the poems. For example, in a familiar sonnet such as 73 ("That time of year thou mayst in me behold") in which the speaker compares himself to late autumn, twilight, and the glowing embers of a dying fire, Vendler points out that the interpretation of the poem would be different if the *sequence* of images differed. The shift from chronological to spatial imagery has a significant effect on the shape and consequence of the poem. Even more closely, she notes the implications, both linguistic and psychological, of using the verbal "glowing" in the third comparison which replaces the nouns ("that time of year" and "twilight") of the first two. A prose paraphrase of the sonnet which does not take into account these linguistic features of the poem would not, according to Vendler's criteria, constitute interpretation at all.

At times, Vendler's "mini-essay" provides a one- or two-page commentary on lexical or anagrammatical matters. At other times, though, her analysis is much more substantial. Her essay accompanying Sonnet 129 is one of the highlights of the volume, and her analysis provides a good illustration of these strategies of unfolding. First, here is the poem:

*Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame  
Is lust in action, and till action, lust  
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,  
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;  
Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight,  
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,  
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait  
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:  
Mad in pursuit and in possession so,  
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;  
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe,  
Before a joy proposed, behind, a dream.*

*All this the world well knows yet none  
knows well*

*To shun the heaven that leads men to this  
hell.*

This interrogation of lust and its aftermath is surely one of the most famous of the son-

nets, all the more so given its anguished tone, which contrasts sharply with other sonnets addressed to the Dark Lady.

Most critics have approached this poem as a definition of lust along what Vendler calls an "axis of similarity"; that is, lust is initially defined negatively as "an expense of spirit" (which puns on an ejaculation of semen as well as an expenditure of spirit), and all the characteristics subsequently attributed to lust throughout the poem add to and support this negativity. Vendler, on the other hand, proposes a different approach, one which emphasizes the changing description of lust across the poem.

She notes the poem opens in an impersonal voice (unlike the first-person speaker in most of the sonnets), one which attempts to define lust in a philosophic or homiletic manner. But this supposed objectivity quickly collapses into an outpouring of adjectives of social trespass ("perjured," "full of blame," "not to trust," and so forth). Further, by the third quatrain, any pretense at the homiletic has disappeared. As Vendler archly observes, "a cleric might be conceived of as pronouncing the octave, but not the sestet, which certifies lust as 'a bliss in proof,' 'a dream,' and a 'heaven.'"

But for Vendler an even more fundamental shift in the description takes place across the poem. In the first eight lines we have a repentant mind in the act of self-loathing, a sort of "morning after" remorse in which the mind which repents attempts to separate itself from the mind which yielded. But in the third quatrain, the diction changes dramatically: in this section lust at first seemed like a "bliss," later it turned out to be a "woe"; more tellingly, to the speaker lust first seemed like a "joy," later it turned out to be a "dream." What was presented earlier in terms of revulsion takes on a very different coloration, one which counterbalances the initial disgust with an emotion more alluring. As Vendler says, "The poem gives us, in short, two absolutely incompatible yet two absolutely reliable retrospective accounts of lust." As it happens, we all understand intimately these two models of experience: "the model of 'What I think of it now that I look back' and the model of 'How it felt while it was happening.'"

What makes Vendler's interpretation appealing is the fact that one version does not take precedence over the other. To illustrate the simultaneity she sees at play in the poem, she borrows a metaphor from the visual arts: "The poem corrects its first judgmental telling by a second, affective one, but, unlike an over-painted painting, does not entirely obliterate the first sketch." Instead, the couplet (whose final "this hell" brings the speaker full circle back to the anguished start of the poem) acknowledges ironically the cycle of attraction and remorse which will be compulsively played out over and over: "Through the third layer of ironic knowledge we see still the two underpaintings—the penitenti—the first of a post-erotic hell, the second of a brief erotic heaven." Vendler supports this complex portrait of retrospective remorse and vulnerability with detailed analyses of the diction, grammar, and sequence (what she calls "the conspicuous signals afforded by the poem"), and the result is a brilliant rendering of the poem's aesthetic dynamic.

For all Vendler's enlightening and subtle interpretations, and there are many of them, there are places where Vendler's strict definition of the lyric as a solitary activity and her interpretations of the poems seem to strain against each other. In some cases, she says we should consider a sonnet a "reply" to some previous assertion made by one of the protagonists. She considers, for example, Sonnet 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds") to be such a case; that is, that the rhetorical shape of the poem is less a definition of ideal unchanging love than it is a reply to the young man's assertion that love does indeed alter as circumstances change. At other times, she sees a "ghost-poem" lurking beneath the surface of the sonnet, one which

suggests assertions which the speaker feels constrained not to articulate directly.

Both these circumstances produce a "dramatic" element in sonnets where no "other" is supposedly allowed to be alive, or listening, or responding in the same room. But along these same lines, isn't it also clear that sonnets such as 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day") or 55 ("Not marble nor the gilded monuments") are not only affirmative but also *persuasive*?

If the young man being directly addressed in both those poems is not physically present, his imagined presence is surely directing the rhetorical strategies being employed in the poems. And these strategies may involve assumptions of class as well as aesthetic superiority, a point raised by Auden in his "goats and sheep" essay.

From a different perspective, too, what are we to make of the "solitariness" of Sonnets 135 and 136, the two infamous "Will" poems? In both these poems directly addressed to the Dark Lady, the speaker puns on "Will" to refer to, among other things, sexual genitalia (both male and female) and his name. He directs her to let his "will" join all the other wills who have enjoyed her ("Wilt thou, whose will is large and spacious, / Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine?" or, more outrageously, "Will will fulfill the treasure of thy love, / Ay, fill it full with wills, and my will one"). Vendler strains to provide a plausible rationale for such rhetoric. She says the "conspicuous urbanity" of 135 might be understood in light of the speaker's sense of humiliation. But with 136, despite a parallel supposition, she is forced to pose the question, "Is there anything serious about this sonnet?"

Both these poems (or performances) have, thinly sheathed with wordplay, a crude and distinctly male sexual aggression at their core, and envisioning them sincerely spoken by a solitary soul is as difficult as imagining Lenny Bruce delivering one of his routines to an empty nightclub. In light of such "dramatic" circumstance, it becomes even more difficult, perhaps especially for a reader of Vendler's sensibility, to "utter them as one's own words, not as the words of another." But once one allows these dramatic elements to influence or shape our understanding of the sonnets, Vendler's rationale for avoiding social specifications, especially those of class and sex, weakens considerably.

But this caveat should not detract from the fundamental achievement of the book. Vendler again and again lights up the individual poems, and at times the compact essays placed opposite the text of the sonnets are reminiscent of Meyer Schapiro's extraordinary one-page illuminations opposite the paintings of Cezanne and Van Gogh. She is especially good in her rendering of the cluster of sonnets which terminates each of the relationships, and her commentary on 152, the last sonnet dealing directly with the Dark Lady, admirably reviews the terrain she has covered:

The self-lacerating intelligence in the later sonnets produces a voice so undecieved about reality (*the truth*) and himself (*the perjured eye*) that the reader admires the clarity of mind that can so atomize sexual obsession while still in its grip, that can so acquiesce in humiliation while inspecting its own arousal, that can lie so freely while acknowledging the truth. To represent a voice in all its paradoxical incapacity and capacity is the victory of Shakespeare's technique in the second subsequence.

Even though there are now critics who chafe at such analysis as insulated and elitist, it's clear that Auden as poetic shepherd would unhesitatingly include Vendler among those who love poetry for its own sake and understand its nature. More practically, it's hard to imagine anyone who wanted to teach the *Sonnets*, at any level and from any perspective, not benefiting from this monumental book.

Kevin Murphy teaches English at Ithaca College.

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# Midnight Special

## Jascha Kessler

It must have been in 1969-1970 (I count by the academic year), that I met James Dickey. I had had him invited to read at UCLA. Whoever has heard him read must agree that he was masterly on the platform, all charm and power, skill and informal ease. When he stood on the stage of the small auditorium in Rolfe Hall, leaned over the lectern, grasping its front edge with his blonde, hairy-knuckled hands, as if to hold it or himself in place, smiled out and down at a full house of perhaps 300 and commenced to work it over, it was smooth from the first breath he took, though the liquor on that breath wasn't detectable to the audience below him.

It had been quite a pair of days. Only vestiges of those hours remain in my memory, a few mental snapshots and echoing remarks, more or less vivid, more or less memorable. I can't today order the scenes that present themselves to me, so I'll summon them and set them out as they return.

I see us walking about the UCLA campus after lunch at the Faculty Center, and hear Dickey telling me as we strolled towards the sculpture garden, that he had been long agonizing over, of all things, some damned novel he had taken a big advance for and had been hacking at for what seemed to him like forever. "It's not like writing poetry at all," he said, "there are these damn doors you have to open and close for characters, chairs you have to get them into and out of, all that 'he said' and 'she said,' and all that moving them around and explaining the obvious to readers. Prose narrative isn't like saying something in a poem, it's more like filler. I just want to finish and get the hell shut of it, and never try that sort of thing again—I mean, plotting and scenes and chapters and all that endless boring descriptive prose."

I recall agreeing with him heartily, having myself written short stories for many years, and an anti-novel that no commercial publisher would ever risk since it was prose brut and anti-literary—not even the small presses, "anti-whatever" their pretenses, for they were inevitably "literary" themselves. "Is that so?" he said. "Mine's got a big advance from Madison Avenue." He seemed to relish that, as if he had sold "them" a pig in a poke. "It's about red-neck hunters, awful carnage stuff—you don't hunt, I expect?" No, I'd never thought of it wasn't brought up to it, had no opinion about hunting, or hunters either. "City feller" Dickey snorted, throwing in a sibilant "Professor" now and then, which I took as the putdown he meant it, despite my already having reminded him that I didn't consider that academic handle at all honorific, illustrating my point with an anecdote about the time Dylan Thomas had come to read at UCLA in 1950. Trundling into a reception, tea and cakes, the Welsh angel of that Augustus John portrait, who had recently turned up in the States as yobbo, sneered, "Take off those tweeds, you English professor, you!" to the chairman in charge, one Majl Ewing, a snobbish provincial from Tennessee and a pretentious esthete, as I recognized at once when introduced to him on my arrival here in 1961. (Ewing died in 1967.)

I can see Dickey—"Call me Jim!"—"Yes, well, if you'll call me Jascha"—"Okay, okay, Professor—oops!" Oh, that sly Good Ol' Boy snidery, I see him all right—in our backyard on a bright afternoon, when I brought him and Maxine to meet my wife. Drinks were handed round, and thus commenced that long day's journey....

One thing he wanted to know right off was how come I hadn't written to ask him

for poems for that anthology I'd done [*American Poems: A Contemporary Collection* S. Illinois UP, 1964]. I'd been worried he might bring that up, but my answer was ready: I'd decided to limit the writers represented in it, a little more than a dozen, to poets under 40, like the Yale Younger Poet Series. Besides, he was too successful and well-known to need a boost from an anthology like mine. My reply didn't really mollify him. It may have been true, but so what? Dickey wanted in on principle. When I mentioned that Louis Simpson was too old for it too, he remarked, "Strong man, Louis; weak poet." When I said I had included, and he knew it, some early James Wright in it, because at that time Wright had only one book, he said, "Weak man; strong poet." That was a

Dickey was a sensitive man, high-strung, a mite touchy, defenses a mile high. His was a deeply suspicious character; ambitious, anti-academic and competitive, always ready to prove his "manhood" against sissies—professors and the northern intelligentsia.

critical notion about poets that bemused me. "And Jim Dickey?" I asked. His only half-joking reply, "Strong man; strong poet."

He was rather too-loud energy after that, as though still uncomfortably groping for a way to talk easily to us, who were from such a different world than his. When he spotted a butt set up against the garage wall at the end of our unused driveway, Jim immediately asked who was practicing archery here? I told him I had for the hell of it bought on sale a big reflex bow made of rosewood, so as to do something with my son now and then by way of a self-disciplining sport. "Deer hunting," he exclaimed. "that's the great thing! I'm licensed for bow hunting; its the only way to get a real kick. Shooting's for lazy fellers; no sport at all. Get that bow out and let's see what's what." I did, and he began to instruct me how to string the damn thing, which had an 80 lb. pull. "Damn! you could kill a bear with this bow! Can you even draw it?" I said I could, at least for target practice at 20 paces. Dickey let me get my leg around to string it, I knew that much at least—he would have done it himself but his back wasn't in shape. If I was 39 to his 45, still he was a veteran of WWII and Coca Cola's PR department—he had every right to instruct a po' city feller like me. "Who do you think made Coke famous everywhere after the war?" he asked? "I did! Wrote the finest slogan ever written: Things go better with Coke!" He seemed let down when I said we'd never had a bottle of the stuff in our house.

That settled it: I couldn't be much of an American *Landsmann*—not of his anyway. "Boy, what do you drink when it's hot?" I sang him the Pepsi jingle I'd learned back in the mid-30's: "Pepsi Cola hits the spot/12 full ounces that's a lot//Twice as much for a nickle tooooo/ Pepsi Cola is the drink for you...!" I read his contemptuous expression, which signified, euphemistically: Cheapskate! Northerner. Add those together and what do you get? We fooled around, and he had me drawing and putting arrows into the target. When he asked my wife to take a turn, she told him she preferred not to, since she was still wary of throwing her

back out, after a long recovery from a horseback accident two years or so before. He made her hold the bow anyway, to show her form.

"Where'd you hurt yourself, honey?" he asked her, as he stood close behind her and helped her hold the bow right. She motioned at her lower back, and he declared, "Why, that's just where I put mine out in the woods last year going in after that damned buck. Here, lemme see!" Without a by your leave, Ma'am, he unzipped her dress to the small of her back, and started pressing vertebrae, his fingers claspng her hips, his thumbs working their way down from waistline to buttock cleft. Embarrassed, Julia had to stand and tolerate that disguised groping. "No, no, okay, yes, there!" "Just where I got hurt too, honey!" he cried. "Lemme

see if I can help relieve..." "Thanks, but no thanks, it's all right just now," she said, asking him to zip her up again, which he did with that rascally grin of his. There was lots of gin and tonic and the afternoon drifted into dusk, when it was time for the restaurant.

Of that dinner, I recall only the kitschy, highbacked, green-upholstered chairs, and our table looking down on Wilshire Boulevard and west to the bay. And oh, yes, Dickey saying something about writing colonies, apropos of a story of mine, the title piece of my first collection, which I told him had been written at Yaddo. "Ah yes," he murmured to me, "I spent one hell of a long night wrassling all over the floor of her bedroom there with one tough, terrific Jewess. Novelist. She put it in the very first chapter of her book last year. You must know her."

That summer a poet named Robert Sward had turned up with a young second wife, and was renting a cottage over the water on the Pacific Coast Highway. I invited them over for drinks and hors d's the night after Jim's reading, along with a friend from Pasadena, the first-rate and much neglected Los Angeles poet, the late Henri Coulette, and his wife, Jackie. Sward showed up carrying a cased guitar, and when Jim and Maxine drove up, he got out of his car carrying yet another guitar. We were somewhat non-plussed, but I decided they simply preferred not to leave things in their cars.

How wrong I was. We had our drinks, and an hour more or less of forced chat, all six of us trying to adjust to the deliberate charm radiated by Dickey, he being so up after a fine reading, what with a dozen requests for encores. And as he worked at us, looking around at our walls, one could see he was trying to come to terms with the paintings and graphics, especially a dense and powerful abstract painting by Elaine de Kooning. That occasioned some remarks about the New York post-war scene, where difficult things like art and ideas mattered one hell of a lot, and (by unspoken implication) a lot more than poetry seemed to matter, or at least his kind of writing.

Sward sat down next to Dickey, who had immediately taken the commanding winged armchair at the far end of the room

in front of the fireplace, leaning his guitar against its arm. Sward, a soda drinker, sat himself down at his feet in blatant adulation from the moment they'd come in, and behaved as if he were alone with him in that room of eight people. And soon he was, because Coulette and I had started in on the Bushmill's, and left the Beam to Jim. The Irish, always an exhilarating beverage, enhanced what had been my first impression: Dickey was a sensitive man, high-strung, a mite touchy, defenses a mile high. His was a deeply suspicious character; ambitious, anti-academic and competitive, always ready to prove his "manhood" against sissies—professors and the northern "intelligentsia" ["intys," i.e., intellectuals] were sissies by his sort of definition. A sophisticated and well-read man, he would play the redneck.

Maxine's reserved chagrin was visible as she watched him from the corner of her eye, while she talked with my wife on the couch comfortably at the other side of the room: she seemed to have been long resigned to his persona. In short, his struck me as being somewhat paranoid, I would say, meaning no perjury (it takes one to know one, and my childhood in a Bronx Jewish working-class enclave surrounded by Southern Italians was tutored with an alertness to whatever assault was often enough incoming).

Perhaps to block inevitable literary shoptalk or whatever conversation might take directions away from himself, Dickey soon picked up his "geetar," and with a mischievous twinkle in his eye asked permission to play a few of his favorites, which we "of course" wouldn't know, as for instance...Leadbelly? Although I never said it to Dickey then, Huddie Ledbetter had been in our repertoire from the mid-1940s. It wouldn't surprise me if we had sung those songs, from the Lomax recordings and their performances by Woody Guthrie, before Dickey had ever come to them, though our associations with that music were scarcely the same as his deep South Georgia ties. I had had my craw stuffed full of the whole programme on the long hours of a train ride down to D.C. that time the CP had bought a few dozen tickets and handed them out in my Bronx neighborhood to get the masses and the youth to go to a rally and carry placards at the Lincoln monument and hear Marian Anderson sing. The older troubadours had the girls in the last car on their knees, and none of us under-21 suckers, who had gone along in hopes of a pickup, had a chance.

Sward joined along with Dickey, picking as amateurishly at his instrument as Dickey was, humming off-key to accompany him. All that negotiating about which key to play in, and who would play which chords, simply drove Coulette and me into the kitchen, where we stood muttering and putting down jar after jar of the Jameson, as the Irish would say it. We were of one mind: it was unbearable to stay in that room with those two bawling "authentic" folk singers. How the three

*continued on page 11*

# Beatitudes

continued from page 7

"Psalms of Assize":

let us pray  
Gabriel descend  
as a mood almost  
a monody  
of chloroform  
or florists roses  
consensual angel spinning his words  
thread  
he descends  
and light  
sensitive darkness  
follows him down

Where the vowel and consonant transformations that carry the shifts in meaning from 'mood' to 'monody' to 'chloroform' to 'florists roses' are pure music in themselves. Note, too, the brilliant way in which the dying fall of the phrase follows him down is reflected in both the meter and the spacing. In passages such as this, Hill is himself a "consensual angel spinning his words/thread." Or, on a smaller scale, consider the epiphany effected by the slightest rearrangement of both letters and sounds in the final two lines of Part 3 of "Cycle":

So there            there it is past  
reason and measure            sustaining  
the constancy of mischance  
its occlusion  
a spasm  
a psalm

I do not think that there is another poet writing in English today who is able to marshal such remarkable effects with as much rigor and precision.

How does Canaan compare, overall, with Hill's previous work? There is no getting around the fact that much of it is difficult, obscure, pedantic, and almost willfully eccentric at times. It's tough going. Large stretches of it are dry and prosaic, lacking the tightness and control that characterize Hill's best work. At the same time, perseverance brings rewards that simply cannot be found anywhere else in contemporary verse. As crabbed and crabby as he can be at times, Hill is nevertheless a poet of immense and subtle power. He is also virtually unique in daring to write poetry that tries to rise above the merely quotidian to engage with the great moral, social and spiritual questions that face the world in our time. What other post-war poet has had the nerve to propose a vision of history, to take on the mantle of the seer, to grapple with the deepest questions of morality and to deal on any level at all with the philosophical and spiritual underpinnings of contemporary culture? Not since the early modernist masters has there been a poet of comparable ambition and power. While there is no single poem in

Canaan that equals the best of Hill's previous work, the volume as a whole confronts us with a moral and historical vision that cannot be ignored.

In conclusion, I would like to quote in its entirety the poem "Pisgah," which articulates in the most poignant terms Hill's vision of the perilous moral and spiritual situation of mankind:

PISGAH  
I am ashamed and grieve, having seen you  
then,  
those many times, as now  
you turn to speak  
with someone standing deeper in the shade;  
or fork a row, or pace to the top end  
where the steep garden overlooks the house;  
around you the cane loggias, tent-poles, trellises,  
the flutter of sweet peas caught in their strings,  
the scarlet runners, blossom that seems to  
burn  
an incandescent aura towards evening.  
This half-puzzled, awkward surprise is yours;  
you cannot hear me or quite make me out.  
Formalities preserve us:  
perhaps I too am a shade.

It is late afternoon, as an ashamed and grieving God attempts to speak once again to the shade of Moses, tending to his garden on the top of Pisgah, the mountain from which he viewed the promised land shortly before his death. But Moses, unable to hear him or quite make him out, is only able to respond with a half-puzzled, awkward surprise. Though both still seem to be preserved, after a fashion, in the empty forms of inherited ritual, God is forced in the end to the conclusion that even He may be dead.

John Bowers is a professor of linguistics at Cornell.

# Midnight Special

continued from page 10

wives stood it, I don't know. Better manners perhaps.

And that was that. They left, Hank Coulette staggering out to be driven home to Pasadena; Sward managing to make his way to his car to weave his way up the coast, and Maxine, polite, contained, embracing my wife to make amends as Jim packed his guitar away "round about midnight." Maxine was, as Jim had assured us more than once, "a real saint." We must have shaken hands, whether warmly or not I cannot recall. I seem to recollect he avoided my eyes, though whether out of resentment at Coulette's and my absence during the endless two hours of his performance, or disappointed haste to get away from his failure to charm and enthrall two unsociable drinkers I couldn't say, then or now. Dickey seemed to have thought he was obliged to sing for his supper and drinks, or else that he was a good enough performer to earn the same respect for his "Leadbelly" that he believed he deserved for his own work.

In the many years after that weekend, whenever I lectured on Dickey's poetry, I had his grinning face before my mind's eye, as he himself had had that image laid under leaves like a Green Man, as a sort of ghostly watermark on the dustjacket of one of his books. I tried to answer questions of students about Dickey's "poetical character" by discoursing on what I think is truly the case, although I have not come across it in critical commentary. I think that the essential nature to be glimpsed in and through Dickey's most interesting poems is demonic. That there is such a force in certain persons, and exhibited by certain famous writers, I do not doubt: it is not the diabolic, as used in a superstitious or theological sense. What brought me to this view of him was his poem, "Falling," a powerful piece which seems to me ghoulish. The

poet who writes "Falling" speaks as a voyeur evoking a sensational vision: the detailed stripping of a young stewardess sucked from a jetliner when an exit door blows out. As she drops through the stratosphere, the description tends towards a fevered—and soulless because mental—climax until she strikes earth in the rich loam of a Midwest cornfield, a Muse descended, naked, her limbs flung loose as in post-coital drowse; but broken, crushed—so that the farmer who comes upon her amidst the tall corn is filled by an awe rather tinged with necrophilia. That work is a love/death indeed, a poem driven by an obscene subtext, and educing a perverted, erotic frisson. I think the poem is obscene, in the etymological and original sense of the word: unfit to be looked at, and therefore something to happen off-stage. If it were just pornography it would be essentially puerile, and the poem is not that. I attribute its obscene force to what I take as the demonic. One sensed that kind of force in Dickey, though he may have thought he had it concealed behind a breathless, or heavy-breathing, rhetoric.

Nowadays a words like "obscene" or "the demonic" have little meaning in any literary or moral or philosophical sense, since such categories are quite disesteemed and disregarded. But I presume that it can mean something even today to characterize and understand some of the best work of James Dickey, as well as this writer's core person, as emanating from the "demonic"—in the aesthetic sense. At that level, something frighteningly authentic is to be found. It is not necessary to judge him by that notion, but simply to see what he revealed. One really shouldn't ask much more of a poet.

Jascha Kessler, Professor of English and Modern Literature at UCLA, has published seven books of poetry and fiction.

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Child care is a critical need for many of today's parents. Husband-and-wife team Mon and Eva Cochran, who between them have more than fifty years of child care experience, have written *Child Care that Works* to help ease your concerns. They explain what criteria define quality care, precisely what to look for in a child care provider, and how to be assertive and persistent in keeping care that fits your family's requirements. *Child Care that Works* also provides ways to understand and ease your child's separation anxiety, tips for financing quality child care, and a resource directory of national and state child-care organizations.

*"Gives parents the tools to make good child care choices and to look for quality in whatever their choice may be...extremely useful and timely."*  
—Dr. T. Berry Brazelton

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# An Accidental Classic

Bryna J. Fireside

The next time your adult child comes home to recharge his or her batteries, consider it a good omen. Who knows? The nurturing vibes of the old homestead might encourage your progeny to use this "down time" to create something of value for themselves, for others, even for future generations.

Consider Ruth Stiles Gannett at 22 going on 23. (Most of us in the Ithaca area know her as Ruth Kahn.) Some 52 years ago, Ruth came back to her father's home in Cornwall, Connecticut. A recent Vassar graduate, Ruth had moved to Boston with some friends and was ready to conquer the world—or at least a piece of it. At first she envisioned herself as a master toy maker and perhaps a writer of sorts. The reality of earning a living by day, while designing original toys in the evenings, turned out to be something of a disappointment. Working all day at rather boring jobs and coming back to her apartment to spend hours more working on her toys didn't seem to be getting her anywhere. And besides, her roommates were going off for glamorous evenings with handsome young men and seemed to be leading exciting lives.

In fairly rapid succession, Ruth had quit a low-level job at an MIT radiation lab, where she had to punch a time clock in and out; a waitressing job at a little restaurant in the Beacon Hill section of Boston, which catered to genteel ladies who ordered seventy-cent chicken croquets for lunch and left five-cent tips; and finally a job at a ski lodge in Vermont where the help had to eat the leftover day-old sandwiches not consumed by the paying guests.

"There's something wrong about all this," Ruth recalled thinking. Not only wasn't she having any fun, none of these jobs added up to anything remotely interesting or worthwhile. And any money she got for her original toys, didn't begin to pay for her time and labor. It was, she knew, time to rethink her options.

"So I went home. And that's when I picked up on this little story I had started writing back in Boston," she said. "My father (who was the book reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune*) was busy writing a book and my stepmother was doing illustrations (her stepmother, Ruth Chrisman Gannett, had done the illustrations for the first edition of Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flats*), and it was raining. So I sat by the fireside every day and I wrote my story. You see, I had to write every day just to see what was going to happen. I really didn't have it planned."

When Ruth finished her story—she called it *My Father's Dragon*—she read it to her family, "and they thought it was a fine story." It all might have ended then and there. How many of us have a drawer full of our youthful scribbles? Except that a few weeks before Ruth finished her story, a family friend snagged her an interview with the children's book editor at Random House. Ruth was sort of hoping to land a job in publishing. That seemed to be a worthwhile goal for the moment.

The editor actually took her out to lunch, but she didn't have an opening, and by way of winding down the interview, she asked if Ruth were working on anything.

"I told her I was working on a story, and, being very polite, she asked to see it." Of



Photo by Bryna J. Fireside

course, editors get thousands of stories, thought Ruth, half dismissing the idea of submitting hers, but her father said, "Well, why not show it to her." So Ruth asked the family housekeeper, who was on her way to the city, and had to walk by Random House anyway, to drop it off. At that point Ruth did not consider what she had done as of any consequence. What she'd written was really to amuse herself.

Yet that simple act of the housekeeper set off a chain reaction that has continued to this day. The editor sent the manuscript to Shady Hill School in Boston, where there was a program called Junior Reviewers—the schoolchildren and the teachers read manuscripts sent to them by children's book publishers. The teachers reported back to the editors their own and the children's reactions. Sometimes the teachers sent comments such as "well, children will read anything," or "it was a wonder that they read this at all."

The report on *My Father's Dragon* was as follows: "The teachers think this is the work of a maddened mind, but our function is to tell you what the children think. And they liked it!"

"And that," said Ruth, "is how my manuscript got accepted. I don't believe this is done any more. No one bothers to ask children what they think. But this was back in 1946."

Not only did real children get a chance to comment on the manuscript, but Ruth herself had the final say in choosing the illustrator. The publisher wanted to play it safe and team Ruth up with a well-known illustrator. Several were suggested. But "I just felt that they had done too many books, and perhaps they really weren't reading them anymore. I wanted the illustrator to be someone to whom this story would be something special."

While Ruth searched for just the right illustrator by poring over dozens of children's books at the New York Public Library, a young man stopped by to chat with her. He, himself had just graduated from the Yale School of Design. Ruth agreed to let him try his hand at illustrating the story. "They weren't very inspired drawings," said Ruth, but the young man didn't seem to mind. In fact, a few months later he invited her to a party at his loft in Greenwich village, where he lived with his wife and small children. And there was a really delightful young man there, who had a rather charming, slightly German accent.

That interesting man was Peter Kahn, a young artist and calligrapher who was about to launch his career as an art professor. So began what would become a nearly 50-year marriage, much of it lived in Ithaca and Trumansburg. Of course, that's quite another story.

But as for the illustrations for *My Father's Dragon*, "It suddenly became obvious that my stepmother should do it," said Ruth. It couldn't have been a more perfect match of author and illustrator, for it became a true collaboration. "First she asked me to draw the dragon, and then to draw the maps and the mother so that she could have some idea of how I saw things." In fact, Ruth even made a prototype of the dragon from which her stepmother worked. The final illustrations, however, were the artist's conception. "I think the illustrations are one of the reasons that the book has lasted," Ruth says modestly. "People think that they must be in color! It's because they weren't just line drawings. They were made with a grease crayon on grained paper. The shading gives the appearance of a lithograph, and people imagine that they are in color."

As Ruth's relationship with Peter Kahn deepened, so did Peter's involvement with the book. He chose the type and did the book design. My stepmother also took great care with the graphical elements. She would say, "do you think we could move something to give me a little more room. I want to put this illustration just exactly where the action is."

When it came out in 1948, *My Father's Dragon* swept reviewers off their feet. "This is without a doubt the funniest book that we have seen in a month of Sundays," wrote the *Saturday Review of Literature*. "A true work of art," praised the *New York Herald Tribune*, which later named it the best children's book of the year. And there were more awards to come. It won a typographical award, and was named a Newberry honor book the same year. Later, it became a Junior Literary Guild selection, and then Scholastic published it in paperback.

On the surface, *My Father's Dragon* (and its two sequels, *Elmer and the Dragon* (1950) and *The Dragons of Blueland* (1951)), is an adventure/rescue story. But the story resonates deeply with both children and adults because the hero is at once a little boy of nine and the father to the child who tells the story. The basic theme is that of empowerment. The young narrator, Elmer Elevator, at first is the protector of the baby dragon, until the dragon is freed. At that

moment, the roles reverse and the dragon is the one who saves the hero and himself from the angry wild animals.

By allowing Elmer to take only the most ordinary objects with him on his adventure, the author is saying that there isn't anything magic about growing up; it's how we use what we have that will see us through. Perhaps because the author, at the time she wrote the book, was on her own quest for who she was, the book achieves a kind of universality that continues to speak to the deepest concerns of children everywhere.

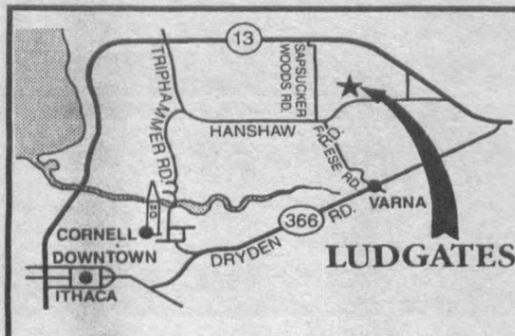
The instant success of *My Father's Dragon* was heady stuff for the now 25 year old author, who no longer had to look for a meaningful job. She concentrated on the sequels: *Elmer and the Dragon* and *The Dragons of Blueland*. By this time Ruth Stiles Gannett had already married Peter and begun to raise their family, which eventually numbered seven daughters. Ruth made a conscious decision not to write any more dragon books. Not that she had the time to write any more. Nor did she have to!

Not only has *Dragon* been selling like hot cakes all over the United States, it has been translated into Japanese, Dutch Italian, French, Swedish, Danish, Faroese, and there is a separate English edition. But it is the Japanese who are absolutely passionate about *Elmer and the Dragon*. It has become part of the third-grade curriculum all over Japan, and is read to virtually every preschool Japanese child. In addition to a video version using puppets, made for Japanese audiences several years ago, last year there was a full-length cartoon movie that was shown in all of the first-run movie theaters. Marketing in Japan even includes key chains, blow-up water toys, Dragon puzzles, T-shirts, calendars, and toy dragons.

Meanwhile, Random House has not been unaware of the *Dragon's* 50th anniversary. (Nor has *The New York Times*, which chose *My Father's Dragon* as the best children's book for 1948 in a Book Review article on the best American books published in the last half of this century.) Random House has reissued the trilogy in hardback, and has created a delightful little dragon with a blue and yellow body, gold wings, and red feet and horn. It's size is perfect for three and four year olds to hold. On March 28, Ruth will have a major book-signing in New York City, at the Books of Wonder bookstore.

"It just seems crazy to be doing this 50 years later," said Ruth from her unpretentious century-old farm house in Trumansburg, where she lives surrounded by her late husband's paintings, and attends to her 19 egg-laying hens, takes care of zillions of flourishing plants and feeds the dozens of birds that flock to her bird feeders. She volunteers at the Trumansburg Public Library, and is always ready to entertain any of the eight grandchildren who may come from near and far to visit. She of course still receives many letters from adoring fans, which she answers in her own hand. And on the landing of the second floor of the farm house there is a smallish bookcase which is filled with the many editions of her accidental classic—*My Father's Dragon* and its sequels.

Bryna J. Fireside is the author of several books for young readers, including *Choices: A Student's Survival Guide for the Information Age*.



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